PS4 & XBOX ONE EVERY BIG GAME REVIEWED



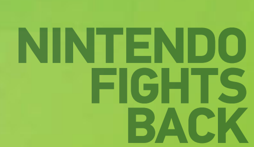
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STEPS TO INDIE GAME SUCCESS
Developers give their tips for stardom

FINAL FANTASY XV
The most stunning game of the generation?



Wii U's comeback plans exposed

FAR CRY 4
Ubisoft leads an open-world revolution

SUNSET OVERDRIVE
How Insomniac is remaking the apocalypse

WILL MICROSOFT KILL MINECRAFT?

- Mojang's big plans
- Microsoft's masterstroke
- Expanding the empire



HIGHLIGHTS
LITTLEBIGPLANET 3 ■ SAINTS ROW: GAT OUT OF HELL ■ SHADOW REALMS
BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE ■ THE LONG DARK ■ NEVER ALONE ■ PILLARS OF ETERNITY
THE TOMORROW CHILDREN ■ FORZA HORIZON 2 ■ CIVILIZATION: BEYOND EARTH

How do you explain something like *Minecraft*? Its rise to prominence to what can only be described as an entertainment phenomenon has been meteoric. With Microsoft at the helm, comics, books and more can't be too far away; there's already a movie in the works from the director of *Night At The Museum* and *Real Steel*. *Minecraft* has turned into a multi-media empire and when you consider its humble beginnings, that's quite an achievement.

The thing is, the achievement only belongs in part to Mojang itself, or even the original mind behind the game Markus 'Notch' Persson. I would give a large portion of the credit for this game's success to the community that embraced and advocated for it. I'm talking about the hundreds of YouTubers who posted their play sessions, the Twitch channels broadcasting the game live and the amazing worlds or contraptions being made by creators and shared online for the world to see.

From a working computer to a detailed and astonishing recreation of Westeros, we've seen the creativity of *Minecraft* writ large week after week. I think seeing those amazing buildings, machines and worlds has done more for the proliferation of *Minecraft* than any advertising campaign ever could. That the game has grown gradually, evolving to the much more involved and expansive project over many years has also helped, keeping it fresh month after month. What will the future hold? I can't wait to find out.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




Red received TM154
SABRINA.


from

Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 154 | 14



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MINECRAFT
Will Microsoft kill Mojang or is this a positive step in the building of a new gaming empire?

Discuss

NEWS
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OPINION
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(IWATA'S WONDERFUL WORLD)

Nintendo fights back

→ It's been a bipolar year for Nintendo, but things seem to be getting back on track – yet how long will it last, and can the company keep the momentum going?

Sony and Microsoft are absolutely killing it – their rivalry is comparable to the Apple/Google war, or the Amazon/eBay grudge match: both sides of the battle may be pitted against one another, but the constant struggle for superiority keeps the companies on their toes, perpetually trying to outdo one another with tech, hardware and software. Nintendo – an outlier on the mainstream console market for some time now – constantly tries to break back into the mainstream, but the Wii U seems to be a millstone around the company's neck.

"In a very rare occurrence for the videogame industry, Wii U shipments actually declined in 2013 compared to 2012, despite only being available for one quarter of 2012," explains Gartner analyst Rob van der Meulen – whose company forecasts console production numbers in relation to market events. "[As a result], we have reduced our forecast for the 2013 through 2017 period, primarily due to lower expectations for the Wii U as the console has failed to gain traction with consumers. Strong launches in 4Q 2013 from Sony and Microsoft with PS4 and Xbox One, respectively, were not enough to offset the weakness at Nintendo." Consequentially, Gartner altered its forecasts – dropping the number of predicted Wii U units to go on sale by 4 million over a four-year period, claiming "it's unlikely the Wii U will recover," while conversely increasing predictions for the Xbox One and PS4 since Gartner "expects these consoles to benefit from Nintendo's weak showing with the Wii U."

Traditionally, Nintendo has been incredibly reliant on hardware sales – typically 55 per cent of the company's net revenue is derived from sales of handhelds and consoles. The Wii U decline has been compounded by the falling sales of the 3DS, too, which has suffered a 40 per cent decline in sales over the last fiscal year. That said, as of 30 June, Nintendo had sold 44.14 million 3DS units, which isn't bad when you consider the overall handheld market has been hit by a 57 per cent decrease over the last hardware generation (and Sony won't release the sales figures of the Vita).

THE HIT THE Wii U took after the launch of rival consoles last year has staggered the company, but it has by no means routed it: in fact, it's galvanised Nintendo's resolve, and after a strong E3 showcase, the company's stock value climbed from around -20 per cent to -15 per cent (and has held at that position too; not bad going in the space of a month).

Above From an optimistic start in February to a slump in stock during the middle of the year, things seem to be getting slightly better for Nintendo.



DATA STREAM → PROJECT CARS HAS BEEN DELAYED UNTIL MARCH 2015 FOR GREATER 'VISIBILITY'

Contents

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> "The Wii U as a console has failed to gain traction with consumers"
>
> Rob van der Meulen, market analyst, Gartner

There are myriad reasons for this recovery – the effect of Nintendo's nostalgia-hitting franchises can't be underestimated. "*Super Smash Bros.* for Nintendo 3DS is already in the hands of more than 2.8 million people worldwide, and the road ahead looks great," reveals Nintendo of America's executive vice president of sales and marketing, Scott Moffitt, presumably referring to the upcoming Wii U release of the game (pegged for 5 December). "Nintendo's holiday software lineup is more than impressive, and our Amiibo figures start a new chapter in the world of Nintendo interactive entertainment."

Nintendo is listening intently to its fans; the Japanese manufacturer knows its catalogue of familiar titles inspire a fervent fandom, and by keeping its ear firmly to the ground, more opportunities arise for it to turn nostalgia into profit. For example, *Super Smash Bros.* Wii U is launching alongside a retro-styled GameCube pad: something marketed to the hardcore fanbase as an accessory they couldn't *possibly* go without. Nintendo likely hopes its Amiibo venture will bolster the install base, too. Following in the footsteps of *Skylanders* and *Disney Infinity* – franchises that have taken advantage of the gaming-accessory market for great profit – Nintendo's plan to merchandise its iconic characters will be another string to its first-party-focused bow. Considering each figure costs $12 (inevitably translating to an inflated £10), Nintendo could potentially have a real money-spinner on its hands with Amiibo – especially alongside a format-wide character roster celebrated by *Smash Bros.*

Captain Toad also received a vague European release date for January earlier this October – another strong, first-party title Nintendo is likely to see a lot of buyer activity evolve from. Then there's the now-yearly *Pokémon* release the company can look forward to in November, which – if last year's figures can be replicated – is set to boost 3DS sales by over 250,000. Compound that with the upcoming launch of the confusingly titled New 3DS and Nintendo has the opportunity to stem the haemorrhaging sales of the 3DS that have been dwindling by the month over the past year. While the company could be accused of cannibalising its own market (upcoming games such as *Xenoblade Chronicles 3DS* can only be played on the New hardware), die-hard Nintendo fans will still want to invest in the console – it's just another example of how Nintendo is masterful at extracting

Above *Bayonetta* was an odd choice of character for Nintendo to add to its family-friendly roster, but she seems here to stay now. Not that we're complaining; it shows Nintendo is looking at every facet of gaming to build its library.





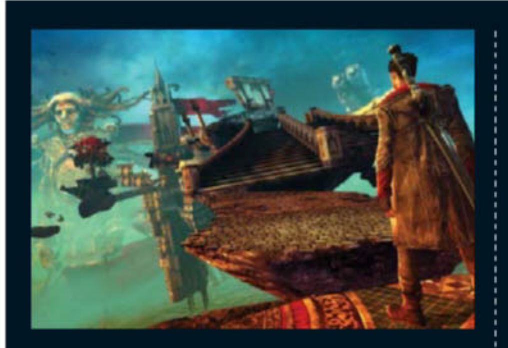
Above Ensemble games like *Mario Kart* and *Super Smash Bros.* are always going to be guaranteed money-spinners for the publisher/developer.



 **FANS ARE SEEKING $150,000 TO LAUNCH AD CAMPAIGN CONVINCING VALVE TO MAKE HALF-LIFE 3** 

Third-party pooper

Nintendo's unwillingness to chase third-party titles is arguably the reason the Wii U is missing out on the sales the Xbox One and PS4 are attracting. After all, Nintendo has always relied on the casual market while other companies chased the hardcore. Perhaps by poaching the following titles as Wii U exclusives, Nintendo could gain more favour in the market. After all, it worked with Bayonetta…



NINJA THEORY

THE SUCCESS of *Bayonetta 2* on the Wii U could set a precedent for Nintendo's approach to attracting third-party developers to its cause, going forward. The most obvious choice for Nintendo to try and strong-arm into exclusive development deals would be Ninja Theory (after PS4-exclusive *Hellblade* is out of the way). Keeping the *Bayonetta* crowd on-side, while giving them something new to play with, could prove lucrative – especially if Nintendo offered to fund *DMC 2*, slapping a whole IP away from Sony and Microsoft.



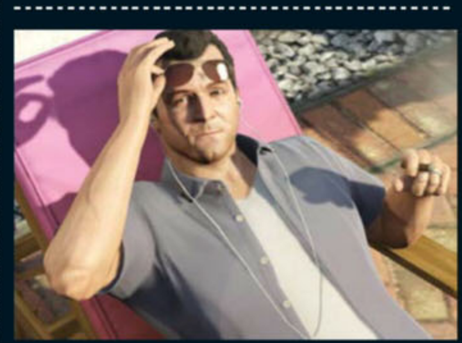
THATGAMECOMPANY

NOW THAT thatgamecompany's three-game tenure with Sony is up, the developer could sell its wares to whoever offers the best tech to experiment with. The success of *Flower*, *Flow* and *Journey* has attracted over $7 million of venture capitalist investment to the company, whose next project is aimed at 'innovating touch controls'. If applied to the Wii U and 3DS (rather than the more realistic prospect of it landing on iOS), Nintendo could win over a sizable crowd from gamers that fell in love with the studio on the PS3.



KIM SWIFT

THE DESIGNER behind *Narbacular Drop*, *Portal* and *Quantum Conundrum*, Kim Swift could work wonders with the Wii U and its unique game pad – the puzzle-based games that take advantage of rifts in space, time and dimensions could translate well to the Wii U pad. Imagine having to bring an item into your hands from the screen, fiddle with it, and then pop it back into the game to solve a puzzle. Swift's eye for level design would work wonders on the Wii U, and if Nintendo wanted to attract puzzlers, she'd be the best bet.



ROCKSTAR

WE KNOW, we know – it's never going to happen, but this is a purely conceptual boxout. Simply think of the implications if Rockstar devoted even just a small team to creating a Wii U exclusive – *Bully 2* or (forgive us for teasing) even *Red Dead Redemption 2* could work fantastically on the console. The games community would erupt in outrage over Rockstar going platform-specific; it would generate an insane amount of publicity and would likely triple Wii U sales figures in a heartbeat.



as much profit as feasibly possible from its tightest demographics.

NINTENDO KNOWS THAT it operates on the casual market, and its insistence on scheduling all of its releases for the holiday period is a canny move, aimed at attracting the bored youth with hours to kill. After all, that's when consumers are both most likely and most willing to shell out. The younger audience, after all, doesn't typically have money of its own to spend…

"The Wii U's release schedule is vastly superior [to the Xbox One and PS4]," explains veteran games industry analyst Michael Pachter, "But its installed base is vastly inferior, so unless a lot of people who don't

Below *Yoshi's Wooly World* is a perfect example of how Nintendo is pushing boundaries and trying out new things that other major publishers wouldn't even consider.

DATA STREAM → PS4 THE TOP-SELLING CONSOLE FOR NINE CONSECUTIVE MONTHS THIS YEAR







Left Nintendo has tactically orchestrated its library of exclusives to pepper the next year's gaming calendar, yet even games like *The Legend Of Zelda* (pictured) that don't have a release date are already generating plenty of hype.

own Wii U hardware get off the couch and buy a unit, [their schedule] isn't going to help them much." If the likes of *Sonic Boom, Xenoblade Chronicles X, Captain Toad, Kirby And The Rainbow Curse, Yoshi's Wooly World, Mario Party 10, Splatoon, Devil's Third, Mario Maker* or *The Legend Of Zelda* can persuade customers that haven't already fallen for the Wii U to *finally* bite the bullet, Nintendo could reassert itself as a prime contender in the currently Sony-and-Microsoft-dominated console market, and perhaps win back some of the third-party support they've been steadily losing over the last two years.

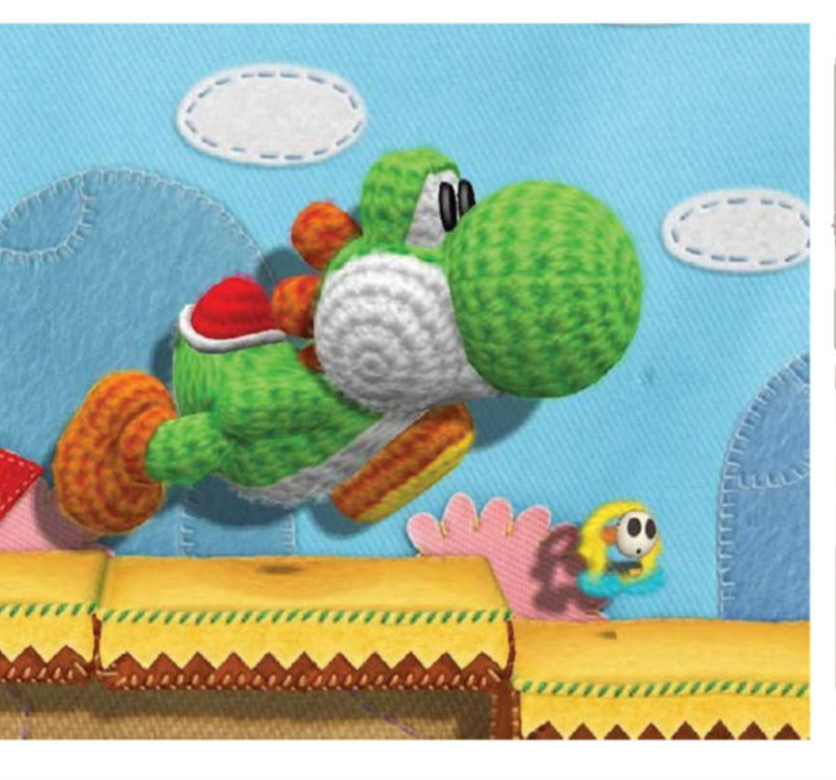
> "The Wii U's release schedule is vastly superior to the Xbox One and PS4"
>
> Michael Pachter, industry analyst

Nintendo's seeming distrust of the third-party publishers perhaps dates back to its survival in the games-industry crash of 1983 – where it vowed off third-party support in the wake of Atari's failures and the influx of cheap games saturating the market (provoking Nintendo to begin its still-operational 'Seal of Approval' branding). It was a bold move, and one that arguably saved the company from bankruptcy, but times have changed, and the current market *revolves* around the strength of the third-party game – something Nintendo perhaps needs to reconsider.



Below It's obvious why Nintendo is releasing the Wii's *Xenoblade Chronicles* on 3DS – it was one of the console's best-reviewed games.

Nintendo may have been knocked off its feet by the surprisingly strong launches orchestrated by its competitor companies, but the Japanese veteran isn't that easily defeated. We've heard Nintendo referred to as the Smaug of gaming, sitting atop its Wii-built millions and waiting. Nintendo has been in the videogame business since the Seventies, and has proved a lot more durable than its historical rivals (a fact that Sega, Atari and – to a lesser degree – Activision can attest to).



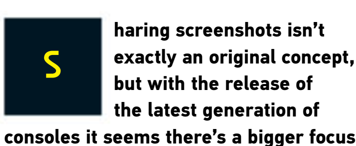




(MAKING GAMES BEAUTIFUL)

How the PS4's Photo Mode is turning gamers into artists

→ The addition of a feature that allows gamers to take and share screenshots in a snap has led to the rise of a surprising new art form and direction for gameplay - finding the perfect shot

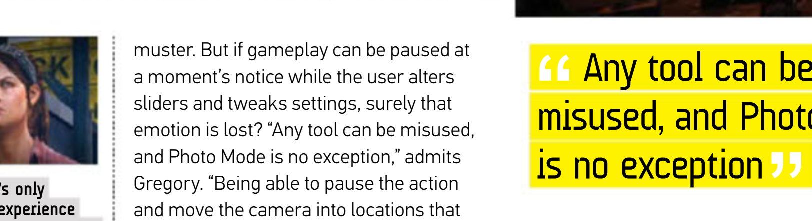


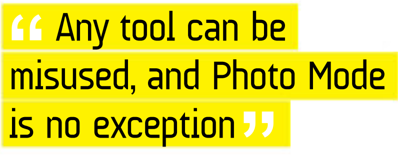
Sharing screenshots isn't exactly an original concept, but with the release of the latest generation of consoles it seems there's a bigger focus on sharing your experiences. The PS4 in particular has a slick system in place for posting those images online – and a quick search for #PS4Share on Twitter will highlight just how often it's used – and now with the addition of in-game feature Photo Mode it's easier and more rewarding for gamers to express their creative sides. It's such a simple idea, but when trying to sell the benefits of a brand new console what better way than to have the best looking games on the format shared freely and easily by those that play them.

"I don't really know specifics but I do know that when Photo Mode shipped, we very quickly saw a flood of great pics on NeoGAF" says Jason Gregory, lead programmer at Naughty Dog and one of the key proponents of *The Last Of Us: Remastered*'s inclusion of Photo Mode. "Who knows how many were shared to Facebook and other social media outlets. All I can say is we were all very pleased with how much use the feature seemed to be getting." A dedicated thread on the popular forum maintained regular visits during the release of Photo Mode, while hundreds and thousands of others appeared all over the web as players tried to portray their creativity by capturing the game's most poignant moments with as much artistic merit as they could muster. But if gameplay can be paused at a moment's notice while the user alters sliders and tweaks settings, surely that emotion is lost? "Any tool can be misused, and Photo Mode is no exception," admits Gregory. "Being able to pause the action and move the camera into locations that aren't normally achievable can lead to some minor spoilers, and can tend to break the tension, immersion and flow of the game." But what is interesting is how many claimed the addition of Photo Mode enhanced the expressive nature of Joel, Ellie and the rest of the *TLOU* cast of characters – a testament to the solid work Naughty Dog has put into facial animation over the years.



Above It's only through experience with The Last Of Us' in Photo Mode – where a single image can still manage to portray a story or an emotion – do you realise quite how impressive the facial animation is.





"Any tool can be misused, and Photo Mode is no exception"

Finding that perfect shot with Photo Mode – in spite of its enforced restrictions – takes as much knowledge of composition, lighting and framing as 'real' photography, but even these simple tools are incredibly empowering. "I'm amazed by two things: one, the incredibly high quality of the photos being posted by so many of our players – they all seem like pro photographers to me!



Inset The addition of Photo Mode to games can alter the way gamers play, with those artistically inclined setting up the perfect shots by playing in particular ways. It's a whole new layer of enjoyment.

→ HALO: SPARTAN STRIKE TWIN-STICK SHOOTER ANNOUNCED FOR WINDOWS 8 DEVICES AND STEAM

And two, I have seen quite a few photos that depict an angle or moment that I didn't even realise was in the game at all! Many of our players appear to be very good at finding amazing camera angles and coaxing the game into producing shots that are artistically composed and emotionally charged." But this is still hand-crafted software; letting budding photo journalists pick apart these fantasies is something the developers are keen to restrain. Gregory acknowledges that Naughty Dog implemented camera restrictions to prevent them from seeing parts of the world that "might be entirely missing" or of lower-quality than expected. "You have to walk a fine line between giving the player as much camera control as possible," says Gregory, "while preventing them from inadvertently breaking the immersion of their own experience."

Photo Mode isn't a widely used feature just yet, but by Gregory's own admission it has been very well received by Naughty Dog's fans – it'll likely turn up in future PS4 games, too. "It has proven to be a popular



Inset With colour alterations and different post-processing effects, it's easy to make creative images with mundane situations.



feature, so it's very possible we'll include a version of Photo Mode out of the box on some if not all of our future projects. I know that Naughty Dog sees Photo Mode as a popular feature," Gregory tells us, "and that is likely to be included in at least some of our future games."

And speaking of the future, where can we expect Photo Mode to go from here? With only a handful of options available across both *InFamous* and *TLOU*, surely there's plenty of room for expansion? "One feature that I wish I had time to implement is the ability to focus the camera on any character in the game, not just the playable character," laments Gregory. "I know it'll be fun to brainstorm new ideas for future iterations of Photo Mode, so we'll have to see what we can come up with!"

THE EVOLUTION OF VIDEOGAME PHOTOGRAPHY

How the art of taking in-game screenshots has grown into a back-of-the-box feature

DEAD END THRILLS



■ Specialising in PC games due to their modability, Duncan Harris (better known as Dead End Thrills) finds fantastic shots in games that most of us wouldn't ever even consider. He was well known for exploring *Skyrim*, where his cinematic approach made the game an artistically beautiful achievement. Harris mods many of his games to remove the UI, pause time, alter lighting effects and freely move the camera.

GRAN TURISMO 5



■ As an unfairly overlooked mode in *GT5*, the Photo Mode provided options to any budding photographer – in fact many more options than the current iterations allow. Elements such as aperture, framing and even the aspect ratio of the image could be changed to hugely affect the high quality image that can then be exported. It didn't receive much notoriety in the press, but the mode built up a huge following of autophiles.

GAME CAPTURE KITS



■ As the rise of capture kits became more prominent so, too, did players' ability to express their creativity. Most kits come with the function to capture video and individual screenshots, and while it was restricted by the game's camera perspective, many gamers enforced otherwise impossible shots. Ideas such as forcing a character against a wall then pushing the camera down achieved a first person-style shot.

INFAMOUS: SECOND SON



■ Though it wasn't a feature of the game when it was released on PS4, it was quickly patched to include an optional Photo Mode – the one that acted as the core foundation for more recent Photo Modes in *First Light*, *The Last Of Us: Remastered* and *DriveClub*. Though it is a popular feature, it's unlikely it'll become a console standard feature.



PHIL SPENCER SAYS MICROSOFT IS WORKING ON SCREENSHOT CAPABILITY FOR XBOX ONE IN A FUTURE UPDATE

(OPINION)

Will Episodic Content Be The End Of The Traditional Boxed Game?

→ Since the runaway success of TellTale's *The Walking Dead series*, more game developers choose to market games episodically. With the advent of on-demand streaming, are the days of the boxed game numbered?

Inset It's not just Western developers that have gotten in on the episodic game – even Square Enix and the *Final Fantasy* franchise is experimenting with it, taking another *Fabula Nova Crystallis* game down the fractal release route with mobile/Vita release, *Final Fantasy Agito*.

The Walking Dead set a precedent for episodic games. A tight, structured narrative fused with a consequential morality system that – over the course of a few months – comes together to create this wonderful experience: an experience that feels like it's all yours, that you shaped it. It takes the agency that you have as a player and breaks it down, taking all the interactivity of a game and using it to remind you of what you did before.

TellTale's first episodic game was actually released in 2005 – *Bone: Out From Boneville* was the start of a long journey for TellTale, and one that has ultimately changed the direction of the whole videogame market. Thing is, until recently, TellTale is the only developer to have gotten episodic content *right*. The studio has had the benefit of nine years experience to shape its philosophy and approach to the medium, whereas the recent developers following suit are more experienced in providing boxed releases. The coming year has Dontnod's *Life Is Strange*, Capcom's *Resident Evil: Revelations 2*, BioWare's *Shadow Realms* and LionHead's *Fable Legends* all moving to release weekly or monthly episodes of larger games. Every single developer in that list has a history in what we can now effectively call 'long-form' gaming – and we're curious to see if the sudden shift will prove successful for the developers in question.

Our new(ish) digital platforms – Steam, Xbox Live, PSN, the App Store – are well-suited to this publishing paradigm; with no boxed copies, manufacturing is cheaper, sales are easier to track and studios can also cut out the whole second-hand market, putting more money directly in the developer's and publisher's pockets.

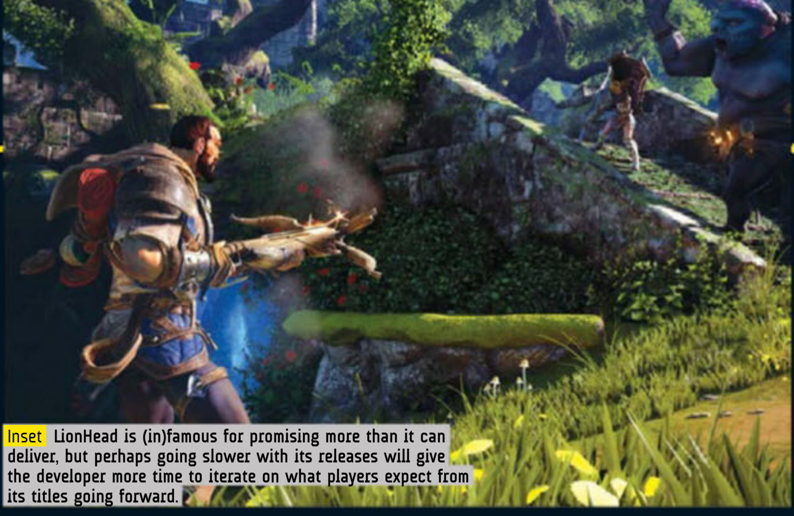
It also allows developers to develop their games iteratively; any feedback on the initial episodes released can be incorporated into later sections without too much difficulty. *The Walking Dead* did this, for example – closely observing how people played Episode One and using that data to inform design choices further down the line – it could be argued that episodic stratagems are being



Below Most episodic games we mention have taken this cartoony art style.



PLAYSTATION HOME, THE 3D COMMUNITY PLATFORM ON PS3, WILL BE CLOSING ITS DOORS MARCH 2015



Inset LionHead is (in)famous for promising more than it can deliver, but perhaps going slower with its releases will give the developer more time to iterate on what players expect from its titles going forward.



Inset Xbox One exclusive *D4* (reviewed this issue) is episodic, too – from director SWERY, the man behind *Deadly Premonition*, you can expect it to be a whole load of crazy.

> “Episodic stratagems are being used to improve the quality of the games we play”

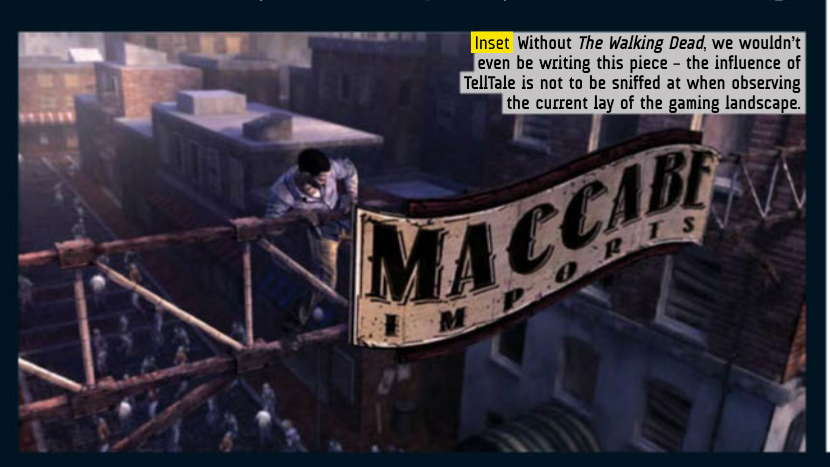
used to improve the overall quality of the games we play.

But hitting upon the right price point is – and will continue to be – a difficult issue: gamers are used to spending around £40 for a boxed game, and a non-verbal understanding has been created between publisher and consumer about what that package will contain. Episodic content, though, is a different issue entirely – do we expect an hour of gameplay, or two hours, or more? How do we approach replayability – because it's episodic, do we only expect to play it the once? Therefore should we pay less for it? And is it right paying for a Season Pass for the first instalment when we have no idea how long it'll take to get the finished product in our hands?

NARRATIVE MOMENTUM IS a continually divisive issue when considering episodic games – BioWare's upcoming *Shadow Realms* will be released incrementally, but our previous experience with BioWare games has seen us 'binge' on them, playing through in five-to-six hour stints, our decisions and their consequences becoming apparent over the course of a few hours. For BioWare's typical user-directed narratives, story structure will need to be altered: each individual sub-plot will need to be self-contained, each episode focused and *whole*. It will be a matter of making gaming vignettes rather than games – *The Walking Dead* and *The Wolf Among Us* do a great job of making smaller stories fit into a wider arc, but for a studio used to providing labyrinthine, sprawling sagas, this poses an interesting problem – and that's before you start thinking about how BioWare's deep RPG mechanics will have to alter for episode-to-episode play.

The episodic system has been around for a long time – *SiN* was doing it back in 2006, and before that, the PC as a platform was a format that leant itself to experimental publishing strategies. Now episodic structures have hit the mainstream, we're sure to see more and more studios commit to it – we just hope those that have established themselves as 'feature-length' games studios continue to keep *that* medium alive, too.

As all comic book readers know: issue one is almost guaranteed to sell well, whilst every subsequent release incrementally loses sales – a pattern that developers should take note of.



Inset Without *The Walking Dead*, we wouldn't even be writing this piece – the influence of TellTale is not to be sniffed at when observing the current lay of the gaming landscape.

PREVIOUSLY, IN VIDEOGAMES…

It could be argued that if episodic releases had taken off sooner, games released in previous years could have had very different receptions and legacies. Here are a few examples:



ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST (NINJA THEORY)

Critically acclaimed but commercially viewed as a letdown, *Enslaved* had all the right ideas, but executed a lot of them poorly. Had it been released in segments, the re-imagining of Wu Cheng'en's classic could have played out similarly to the original epic, rather than feeling a little like a slog all at once.



LA NOIRE (TEAM BONDI)

The case-by-case setup of *LA Noire* was perfect for a fragmented release, and due to each case's skeleton revolving around the classic eight-act structure, each episode could have built to a steady climax, using the 'resolution' phase of the arc to set up the next part of the story you'd have to uncover.



PHOENIX WRIGHT (CAPCOM)

This game's relevance to episodic releases speaks for itself; as with *LA Noire*, it could have been done case-by-case, and your competency during the trials could have cumulated as the trail went on. It could have also legitimised Nintendo's often maligned eShop and given people a reason to check in more often.



THIEF (EIDOS MONTREAL)

If *Thief* had focused less on its bizarre and off-putting story and instead broken the game down into different levels for you to pilfer, sneak and creep your way through, perhaps it would have been a more celebrated return to form for the veteran series. As it was, it remained impressive in places, but a little disjointed.



SURGEON SIMULATOR TEAM WORKING ON GAME WHERE YOU PLAY AS A SLICE OF BREAD CALLED I AM BREAD



Our Episodic Future?

In an age of uncertain sales predictions, triple-A studio closures, indie megastars and digital distribution, it's safe to say the way we consume games is changing. There have always been episodic games, certainly, but now the form is becoming mainstream, and more and more game makers are viewing it as a legitimate way of marketing their projects, so we thought we'd ask you what you think of this quickly maturing gaming format…

Episodic games are too annoying. I never played *The Walking Dead* until they were all out, and I haven't finished the new one as I hated getting into the story and then having to wait. I wouldn't wait three months for every part of a TV show!
Kev Wolves Mason, Facebook

I think there is room on the market for both. Digital episodic releases allow developers to take risks that might not be possible in the current climate with boxed games. While the current games are not very varied, there is scope for novelty, innovation and driving the industry forward as a result
Alexi Gaynanov, Facebook

So long as we're still getting regular, 'full' games, then yes; episodic games are a good direction for gaming. And it'll only work if full 'series' can be seen through… Basically, I'm still waiting for my second *SiN* episode…
@Beemoh, Twitter

Not a fan. But then I'm old school and resistant to change. Back in the good old days you'd buy a game that was 100% complete, had a colourful manual full of art, no DRM in sight and you didn't have to pay subscription fees just to play with other people. Bliss. Now, where are my pipe and slippers…
Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook

I don't mind the idea of episodic games in principle – we watch episodic TV shows after all. But I generally prefer playing games whole.
@StuartForbes, Twitter

Developers need to make sure that if they go the episodic route, they have to keep the episodes released consistently – *The Walking Dead* failed to do this and because of that a lot of people lost interest
@Davidturners, Twitter

Episodic games are a fad. There will be lots that are mediocre, then people will get sick of it, then a few will continue to do it well.
@the_spad, Twitter

Pro: developers can better listen to the public and react to them in the next episode. Con: waiting for a release decreases interest in the next game.
@ivobosman, Twitter

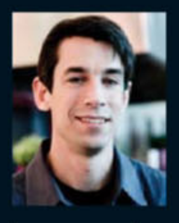
(LEARNING FROM THE PAST)

How Insomniac created the punk-rock apocalypse

→ Insomniac has seen the peaks of success and the nadirs of failure as far as development goes. On the countdown to Sunset Overdrive's launch, we asked CEO and founder Ted Price how Insomniac's chequered history informed Sunset's development, and talked about the influences the game has taken from outside the industry…

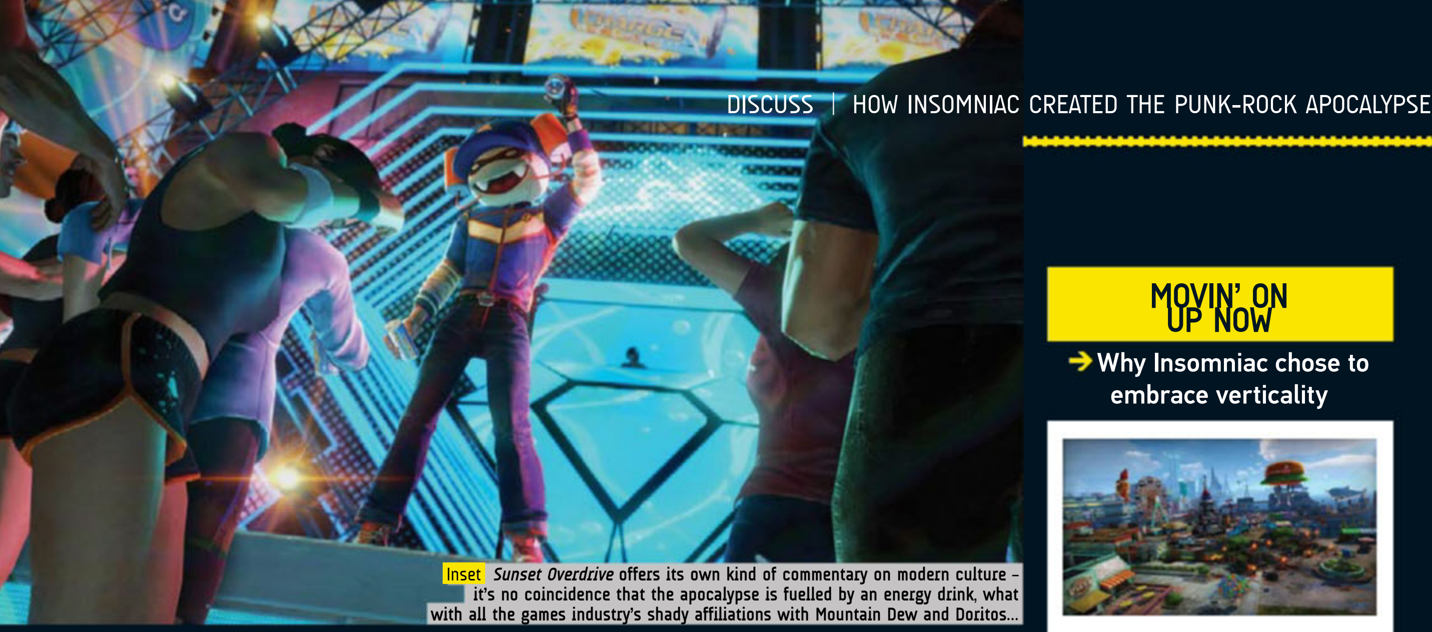
Do you think that the art style of *Sunset Overdrive* will keep it fresh, even when graphics improve elsewhere in the industry?
I think creating stylised graphics is one of our biggest strengths at Insomniac. Although we have made realistic games before, we tend to do our best when we come back and make stylised projects; it lets us take a more freeform approach to colour palettes, form, animation – even audio. It is more timeless, it doesn't age as quickly, and it's much more fun for our team: we aren't adhering to any particular set of rules for what *works*.

The over-the-shoulder camera operates differently in *Sunset Overdrive*, compared to what we've seen in other games recently. Can you talk about that a little?
We've been in the third-person genre since [*Spyro The Dragon*], and continued that with *Ratchet*, too. Even though we went to first-person for the *Resistance* series, third-person is definitely a strength of ours. We focus a lot on camera and controls to make sure they feel invisible; when you notice the camera, then it's a problem. We did a lot of experimentation in this game – because the player's so agile, we noticed if you move the camera in too close, you limit the field of view and you can't see somewhere you can grind on, or vault from, or bounce off. The camera is dynamic – we pull it back when you're balancing or grinding, but move it in when you're boosting to give that impression of speed. It's a complex challenge, but something we love taking on – and it's *super* important to get it right in a game like *Sunset Overdrive*.


Above Ted Price has worked on all of Insomniac's games from *Spyro The Dragon* to *Resistance* and *Fuse* last year.

You've come from *Spyro* to *Ratchet* to *Sunset Overdrive*, with all of them similar in their genre and handling. Would you say it's been a natural evolution to get to this stage?
Yeah, for sure. Making an open-world game is no small task, and making an open-world game that's full of detail, that moves, that's got hordes and hordes of enemies – it's been enabled totally by the hardware. When it comes to characters, too, the fidelity of them is something we couldn't have done on any previous hardware; the models are layered, and there are a *lot* of different choices you can make with your characters and their abilities. We can do that because of memory,

→ GERMAN COMPANY CONSTANTIN FILMS PLANNING ON MAKING RESIDENT EVIL TV SHOW AFTER FINAL FILM



Inset *Sunset Overdrive* offers its own kind of commentary on modern culture – it's no coincidence that the apocalypse is fuelled by an energy drink, what with all the games industry's shady affiliations with Mountain Dew and Doritos…





> "The camera is dynamic – we pull it back when you're balancing or grinding, but move it in when you're boosting to give that impression of speed"
>
> Ted Price, Insomniac, CEO & founder

we can use more sophisticated physics on the CPU – the Xbox One has let us take much bigger steps in world *and* character.

Sunset Overdrive seems like a self-reflective game – one that takes the tropes of the genre (and gaming as a whole) and flips them on their head. Was that always the intention?

We had always wanted to present a very unique style and tone for *Sunset* – one that was very different from all these other games that focus on taking themselves very seriously. But we've also got a story that runs through the game that *is* about self-discovery, but it's delivered in a way that we think is fresh because the character is constantly aware that he's in this situation that they make light of all the time. I hope that the players find it funny, and compelling, and in some ways, emotionally fulfilling.

Below '*Jet Set Radio Future* meets *Crackdown*' is how we imagine the elevator pitch for *Sunset Overdrive* going down… as taglines go, that's certainly not a bad one

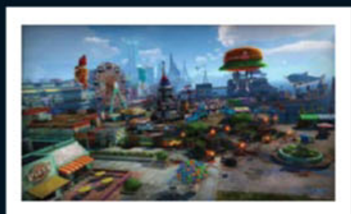


Apocalyptically-themed stories have really taken off in media – not just gaming, but in literature, film and TV, too. Is _Sunset Overdrive_ a commentary on this budding, crowded genre?

It certainly is. But this is not the apocalypse, it's the awsomepocalypse – that's something we say a lot at Insomniac – because we're influenced by other stories and other scenes in games, not based on them. *I Am Legend*, for example: that scene where Will Smith is hitting golf balls off an aircraft carrier… this is a world that's been completely ravaged by a virus, but he's having fun. He's taking advantage of the fact he doesn't have to go to work tomorrow – that he can just go out there with his dog and tool around on the streets in his Mustang.

MOVIN' ON UP NOW

Why Insomniac chose to embrace verticality



AS THE OPEN worlds we play in get bigger and bigger, developers are choosing to build their playgrounds *up*, instead of out. *Sunset Overdrive* is no exception – executing its design similarly to genre stable-mate *Crackdown*: taking on the metropolis in all its imposing glory.

"For us to embrace verticality in *Sunset* was a challenge," explains Ted Price. "If you can see it in the game, you can climb it, and as you progress the buildings get higher and higher. This creates some interesting constraints on design, certainly, but for us, it's important that players feel good about moving around, and that takes an incredible amount of attention to detail."

Sunset Overdrive is a very busy game – what was the biggest challenge in making the visual language accessible, and communicating to the player how the game works?

We failed several times to make traversal work when we were prototyping [*Sunset Overdrive*], and the challenge was moving away from the mindset of gamers that were used to playing cover shooters, and designers that were used to designing them. Once we began breaking that mental barrier – by prototyping the grinding, getting the speeds correct, looking at how far apart objects should be – we had to make sure it was still fun to kill enemies while you're moving around. It's a difficult combination of aiming mechanics, subtle camera movement, enemy behaviour *and* weapon behaviour.





MICROSOFT REVEALS ROOMALIVE, VR LIVING ROOM EXPERIENCE AND EXPANSION OF THE ILLUMIROOM PROJECT

KONGETSU

MOBILE MARKET

Japan gets all the cool stuff



As a huge fan of both fighting games and rock music, it should surprise nobody that the new *Guilty Gear* sits proudly among my most anticipated games. Now, only the Japanese version has a release date (at the time of writing) so I did what I always do in that situation and looked into import prices. Importing is almost a lost art form these days – in a time of global launches and cross-region parity (no more 50Hz screwjobs!), there's not all that much reason to source relatively high-profile games from across the pond any more. Or is there?

I'm just gonna come right out and say it: Japan gets way better limited editions than we do in the west. Over here, there's far too much of an onus placed on the idea that steelbooks are in some way desirable, and too much emphasis on cheap tat – literally nobody wants a statue of that faceless everyman from *Watch Dogs* or a perfect-bound collection of random renders that somehow earns the title of 'Art Book', but that's what we get these days. Hell, the spectacle of these things has already been taken to its logical conclusion – *Grid 2* had a one-off special edition that included an actual custom racing car for a six-figure price tag, while *Saints Row The Third* advertised a similar perk-packed one-shot priced at a cool million dollars. The latter may have been a joke, but that only goes to prove my point – western special editions have malfunctioned, and no longer offer consumers what they actually want.

Which brings us back to *Guilty Gear*. Even without a launch date, the US version has still had its special edition contents revealed, and it's your average haul – soundtrack, art book and keyring in a fancy box. But in Japan, the limited version comes with a bespoke fightpad (I'll be using my old 360 sticks thanks to some CronusMax trickery but the pad looks ace for retro-style stuff on PS4) and I can pick it up for about the same price as the US LE. That's not exactly a tricky decision to make. There's a reason I own Prinnies galore, all manner of *Pokémon* nonsense and five GBAs – great-looking limited edition items appeal to me, as I'm sure they do to many gamers. And especially in terms of LE consoles, Japan is still way in front. There have been a slew of beautiful PSPs, DSs, Vitas (Vitae?) and 3DSs and I wish I could justify owning more. The rest of the world seems oblivious to the fact that the shiny front panel on the PS4 slides right off, but there are already a bunch of Japanese special edition consoles built around the fact.

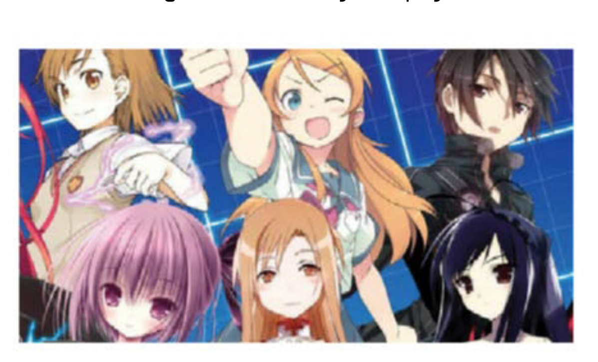
> I'm never gonna complain that we don't get "sexy" anime pillows with every copy of COD

Some Japanese LE contents and pre-order bonuses run a little hot for this country/continent, I get that. There's a cultural divide that can't be ignored and I'm never gonna complain that we don't get "sexy" anime pillows with every copy of *COD*. But developers and/or publishers, when you've got something like *Guilty Gear*'s fightpad, which is of genuine worth to your paying customers, it might be an idea to open the deal to the global market. Otherwise, there are always gonna be people like me who take it old school and get their import on. Sue me. Actually, don't. Import duty alone can be a bitch…

Luke Albiges is Deputy Editor of Play magazine, a collector of import oddities and a huge fan of fighting games that nobody else plays. Let's Rock!



● Like *Aquapazza*, it's a brawler with a cast made up primarily of light novel stars, but the real hook here is the Sega connection – *VF*'s Akira and Pai and a duo of *Valkyria Chronicles* characters make it onto the roster, while many of the stages pay homage to classic Sega games. It's basically *Sega X Dengeki*, in case you couldn't imagine anything less plausible or commercially viable than *Tatsunoku Vs Capcom*.



eSports 101

Your Guide to Pro Gaming



The Origin Story



In the summer of 1997, a young man going by the name of Thresh won a computer game competition and with that win picked up the keys to a Ferrari 328 GTS Cabriolet. In the months following the competition, many people speculated that this would be the pinnacle of what was then called cybergaming. After all, the impressive prize itself was donated by legendary game programmer John Carmack, co-founder of id Software, and Mr Carmack was unlikely to continue donating prizes from his private car collection on a regular basis.

However, over the course of the next three years eSports began to grow, benefitting from the ever-increasing internet connectivity seen around the world. As thousands of new players took to the battlefield every day, this era of gaming also saw hundreds of new tournaments and competitions appear. During this time, the prizes were mostly still hardware and product-focused; whenever cash prize tournaments did appear it was almost always token amounts and certainly not enough to sustain a fulltime career. Although this period saw a huge growth in player participation, eSports was still not a spectator sport for the masses but rather something geeks did in their bedrooms late at night.

> As thousands of new players took to the battlefield every day, this era of gaming also saw hundreds of new tournaments and competitions appear

On top of this, eSports was still faced with a big problem: no matter how groundbreaking, no sport can sustain itself when the players far out-weigh the spectators. Since the beginning of eSports it had always been possible to watch back matches by downloading the file, but this process itself was laborious. It involved downloading from one website, copying it to a folder and then finally loading it up inside the game itself. This experience was fine for the diehard players, but certainly was not the best mechanism to attract new spectators and fans, with many younger gamers not even aware of this process.

What was needed was a viewing platform as easy to use as YouTube, a platform which would stream live games around the world no matter how fast or slow their PC. A platform that didn't require you to even have the game installed, and also provided live commentary. This unlikely perfect combination of services finally arrived when Twitch (by way of justin.tv) was born.

When this final building block was put in place, eSports exploded to a whole new level. For the first time in its short, but spectacular, history eSports had far more spectators than players, with millions – *millions* – of people tuning in to watch eSports every week. These impressive numbers are currently maintaining a consistent upward trajectory in a period of time where traditional mainstream sports viewing and participation figures are declining. It's safe to say that the rise of eSports has only just begun.



Even 15 years since its release, *Counter-Strike* is still a hugely popular competitive game.

Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the industry and is currently eSports director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity



Five Things About

Halo: The Master Chief Collection

In anticipation of perhaps the most ambitious remastering project in gaming to date, we got to sit down with *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*'s executive producer, Dan Ayoub, to talk about why 343 Industries has chosen to revisit Master Chief's core journey, and what that means to fans of the series…

1 It appeals to both sides of the fandom…

"We realised with *Halo: Anniversary* that we had two customers: we had the old guys who remembered playing it first time around, and I remember talking to a few people who were like 18 or 19, and I was like, 'Wow, you were like eight when this game first came out' so for some people this was their first experience. Part of the goal for *The Master Chief Collection* was for people who have never played before to give them something very easy to jump into and get caught up. My hope for the person that has never played it before is that it'll be like travelling back in time and seeing where it all began."

2 It's a celebration of a decade of *Halo*…

"Our approach for all of these maps was… even though we made some slight physical modifications to some of the maps, what we didn't want to do is break time-honoured strategies. People have their strategies for all of these maps, and we've had a few people saying, 'I can't believe how quickly muscle memory kicked in'. That was crucial for us to keep that intact. And dual wielding was another one; when it comes to what people think about our multiplayer, people think about that dual wielding when it comes to *Halo 2* and there was no way we weren't going to put that back in."

3 It hopes to attract the eSports audience…

"What *Halo* is very much about, is fairness and skill. I think that is something that lends itself extremely well to eSports, and perhaps even bring in an additional audience of people that might not have been in here before. But I think that it lends itself to that very well."

4 It makes even *Halo 3* and *4* look better…

"We knew how *1* and *2* would look, because they are getting the *Anniversary* treatment. But when it came to *3* and *4*, what we didn't want was to just port it so that it ran on Xbox One, because that would kinda be a bit of a downer. Especially as *Halo 4* was a bit more recent, we were like, 'Okay, how do we take these and make them feel like next gen titles?' We knew the approach we wanted to make these run at 60fps, make them run at 1080p. We had this strategy to improve the lighting systems and the shaders, and we were really impressed with how fantastic those games looked just going through that. I remember we gathered everyone around my desk when I got it, and they were just like, 'Oh my god, this looks amazing'."

5 It's laying the foundation for *Halo*'s next stage…

"*Halo*'s on the cusp of some pretty amazing things. We've mentioned eSports, there's all the work [Kiki Wolfkill, executive producer] is doing on the *Nightfall* and Halo Channel, new technology, new avenues – you are going to start seeing *Halo* move into even more avenues outside of gaming, and I think we're at the turning point in a pretty exciting future."



> "I got everything there was to get in there. I experienced everything"
>
> ANDY TUDOR, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS

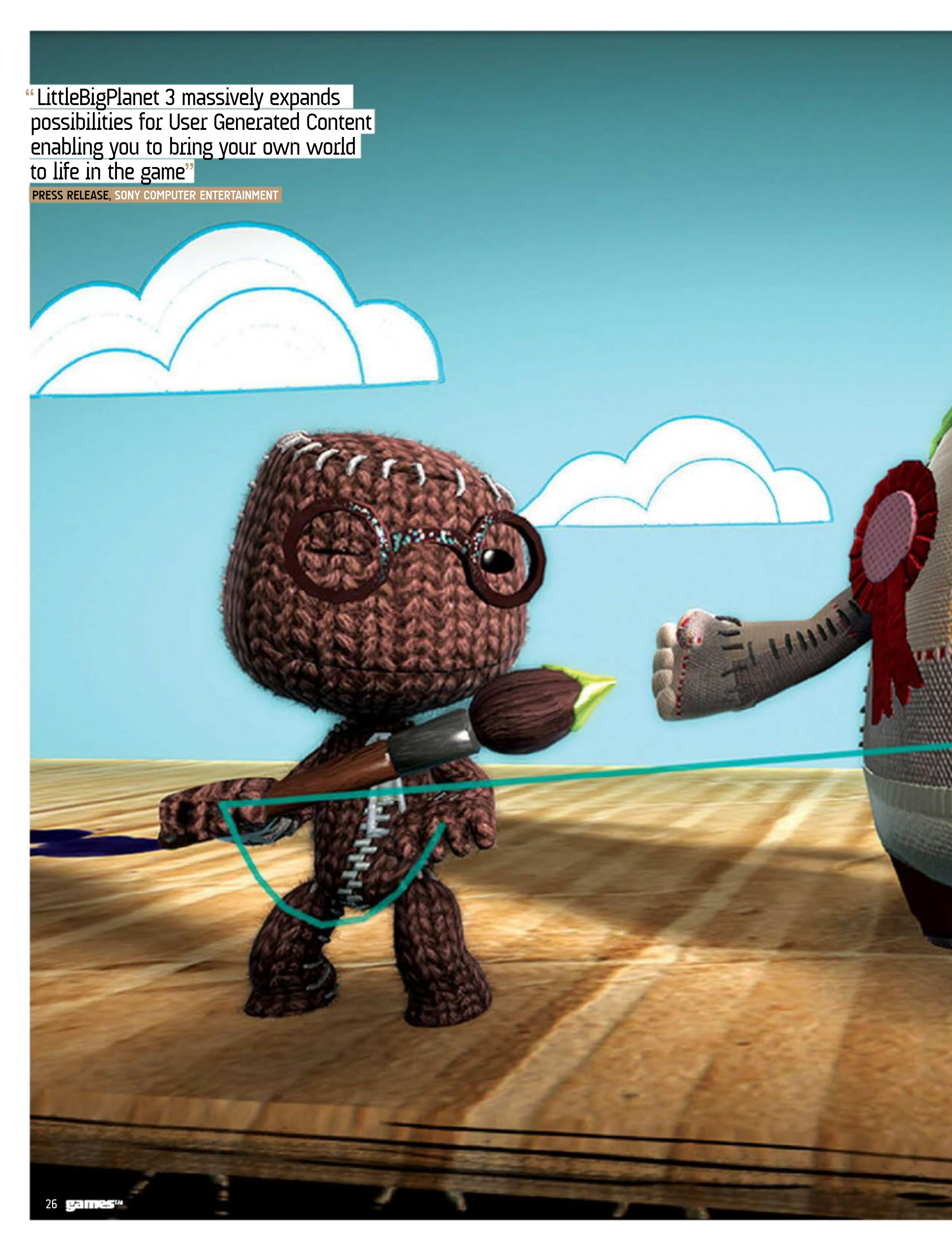


WHY I ♥...

FINAL FANTASY VIII

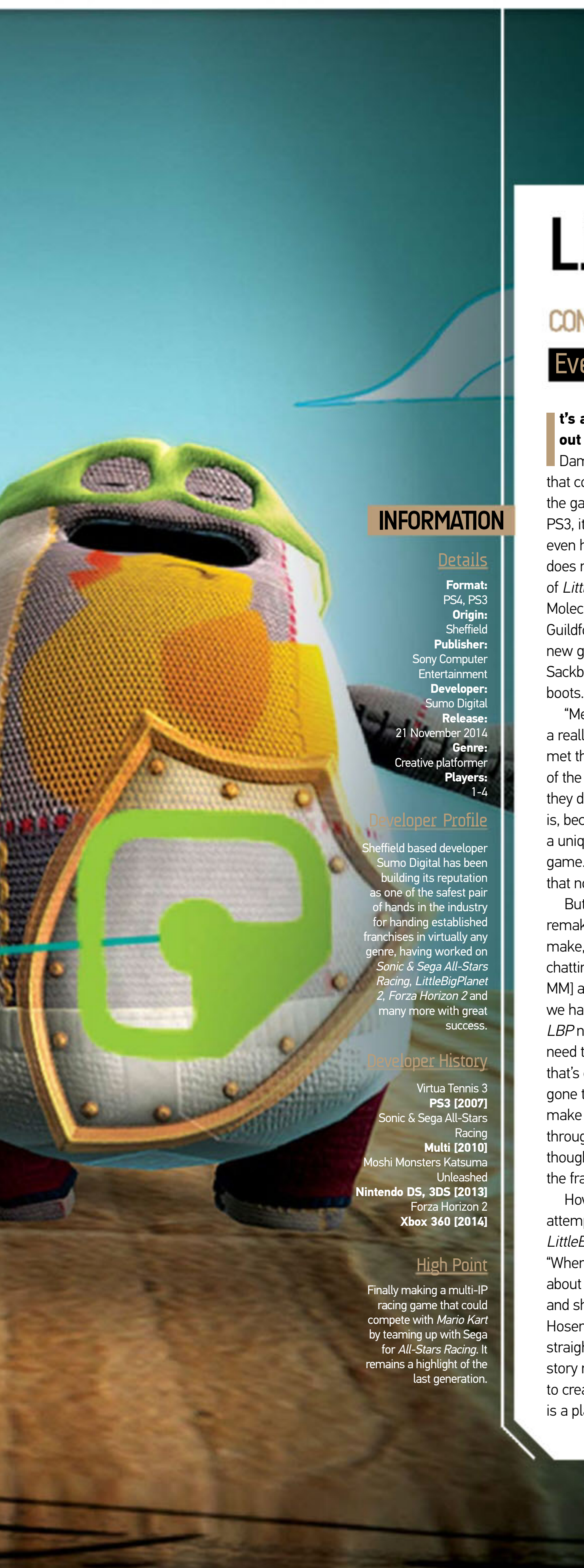
ANDY TUDOR, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS

"Final Fantasy VIII *is one of the three major games that influenced me (the others would be the original* Bubble Bobble *and* Street Fighter, *probably). But I nailed everything in* Final Fantasy VIII. *I got everything; all the Guardian Forces included – I 100 per cent maxed that game. I don't think I've ever maxed anything to that level again. I got everything there was to get in there. I experienced everything; got all the emotional points; cried at the right times... Everything they wanted me to do, I did."*



"LittleBigPlanet 3 massively expands possibilities for User Generated Content enabling you to bring your own world to life in the game"

PRESS RELEASE, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT



LittleBigPlanet 3

CONCEPT ■ Born of the simple mantra to play, create and share, *LittleBigPlanet* gives players the power to make and share their own levels starring Sackboy and now a new cast of characters

Everything changes, everything stays the same

"It's about us trying to pull your creativity out of you," Sumo Digital design director Damian Hosen insists to us, and while that could probably have been said of any of the games produced by Media Molecule on PS3, it feels as if *LittleBigPlanet 3* is working even harder to make it a reality. And Sumo does need to work rather hard. The DNA of *LittleBigPlanet* lives and breathes Media Molecule, but with the creative minds of Guildford working on other projects and a new generation of PlayStation crying out for Sackboy, someone had to fill its intimidating boots. Sumo stepped up to the plate.

"Media Molecule are a really special team; a really talented team," agrees Hosen. "We met them quite a few times in the early stages of the project and tried to get a sense of how they designed *LBP*, why it's the shape that it is, because they're very good at starting from a unique position when they're starting a new game. They always end up making something that no one else could make."

But when you're the developer who has to remake the game only Media Molecule could make, where do you even begin? "I remember chatting to Kareem [Ettouney, art director of MM] and I remember him saying to me that we have to sit down and decide which things of *LBP* need to stay the same and which things need to change," Hosen reveals to us. "He said that's exactly the process that they would have gone through. You can't just stand still and make the same game again. We had to go through that and we had to look at where we thought we could dig deeper into the DNA of the franchise."

How Sumo has gone about this is attempting to bring the core principles of *LittleBigPlanet* closer together than ever before. "When you think about it, *LBP* has always been about play, create and share, but play, create and share have always been very separate," Hosen tells us. "A lot of players will probably go straight into the main menu, hit play, play the story mode and that's it. Other people might go to create, make stuff and that's it." The result is a play mode that involves creating on the fly and a create mode that includes challenges so you are given increasingly complex tasks that will help you gradually unlock your creativity.

"We really thought that there's a great opportunity to cross the streams here a little bit," Hosen continues. "I mean, why not have a play experience that's based on create? Why not have a creative experience that's playful? We just tried to copy over concepts, overlap them more and see where that lead us. That lead us in some interesting directions."

/// This has been one of Sumo's biggest contributions to *LBP3*. Much as Media Molecule had its stamp all over the series, Sumo felt it had to do the same and bring a little of its own creative spirit to the latest game. The other big change according to Hosen was bringing in some new characters who could open up avenues to new gameplay. "[*LBP* is] done in a really charming and idiosyncratic way and we really wanted to experiment with that and exploit that in different ways. The playable characters really came out of a desire to do that. One of the characters changes their weight and shape, one can pick things up and go into the sky. These are all things that give players the chance to explore and experiment in craft world in a completely new way. In essence, we just always wanted to make a team really, a team of characters that were fun to use and I think we managed to achieve that."

It says something about the community that Media Molecule has managed to foster that there really hasn't been much of a backlash to Sumo Digital taking over the series or against Sackboy getting some new friends. If anything, Swoop the bird, Oddsock the dog and Toggle the size-changing whatever have been embraced by fans. "I'm really, really proud of Toggle, because it's a really unique character," says Hosen. "I can't think of another character in games that has his abilities and gameplay style. We've got some really strong levels. One of the things that we really set out to achieve in *LBP3* was great variety through the story mode so that every level is different. We don't really have two levels that are alike in terms of their

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PS3
Origin: Sheffield
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Sumo Digital
Release: 21 November 2014
Genre: Creative platformer
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Sheffield based developer Sumo Digital has been building its reputation as one of the safest pair of hands in the industry for handing established franchises in virtually any genre, having worked on *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, *LittleBigPlanet 2*, *Forza Horizon 2* and many more with great success.

Developer History

Virtua Tennis 3
PS3 [2007]
Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing
Multi [2010]
Moshi Monsters Katsuma Unleashed
Nintendo DS, 3DS [2013]
Forza Horizon 2
Xbox 360 [2014]

High Point

Finally making a multi-IP racing game that could compete with *Mario Kart* by teaming up with Sega for *All-Stars Racing*. It remains a highlight of the last generation.

gameplay hook. There are 30-plus completely unique levels and that's a testament to the talent of the level design team and the power of the create tools."

One of the key reasons why Sumo has been able to maintain the spirit of Media Molecule is that it has packed its design team with people who know *LittleBigPlanet* better than anyone else: former players. "If you look at our team of level designers who come from the community, these guys have been dedicated in honing their creative skills over a number of years to get to the stage where they're strong enough to get a professional job in the games industry," Hosen reveals to us. It's a policy that Media Molecule also followed, bringing in some of the most creative *LBP* fans and adding them to the roster. It's also a story that helped to inspire the plot for *LittleBigPlanet 3*'s villain too.

"Newton was an example of a character who has creative talent and no application and so you get this kind of comical, slapstick, buffoonish character with Peter Seller-ish disastrous results with everything that he does, which gives you a lot of comedy. But the central point to it is that you do have to work hard with your creativity to actually really achieve." There's always been a broad theme of supporting a creative spirit in these games, but never one that was quite so direct. As you are set the task of saving Bunkum from Newton's crazed schemes, there's now a much more direct appeal to add a little focus to your creations, in much the same way as Sumo's Popit Puzzles bring a little direction to the creation mode.

"I'm one of those people that has a lot of ideas and I don't always fully achieve those ideas" admits Hosen. "I can often move from one thing to the next and maybe don't finish what I started. Newton was a bit of a commentary on that I suppose. I think people have a creative element. I firmly believe that."

It certainly became clear as we spoke to Hosen that the *LittleBigPlanet* community is right not to be too concerned about the future of the series. Much as it has inspired its players, this is a series that has brought out new creative spirit in the industry too. Since its earliest days, *LBP* has been trying to disseminate its ideals, and Hosen for one has taken them on board.

/// "I remember working at Sony when *LBP1* was being made and Phil Harrison always used to say that the disc was just the beginning,' he tells us. "I think with *LBP3* as well as *LBP1* and *2*, that's so true. From our point of view we're just in a really novel position to see what starts coming out of the community. We've got cool things coming out of the beta already and that's just going to gather pace from launch onwards and we'll have literally millions of levels with new playable characters and all these new tools coming together. I can't wait to see that."

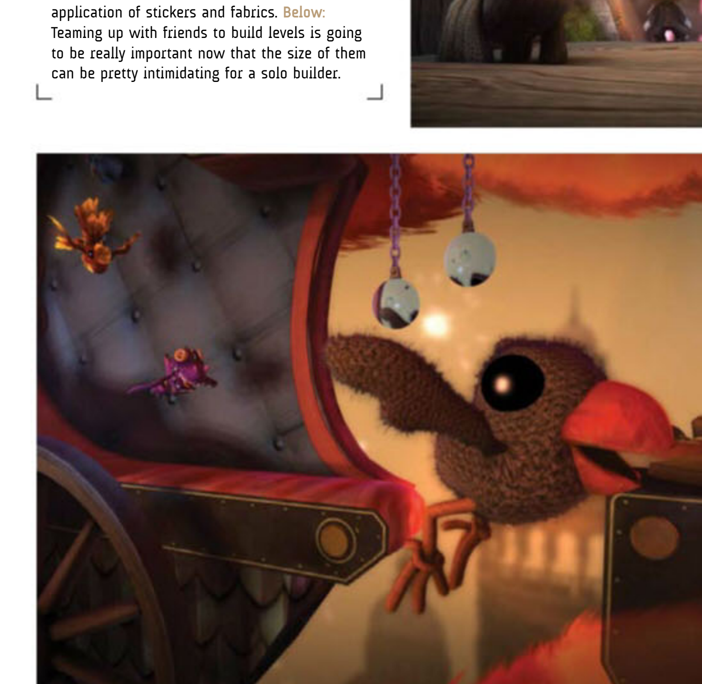
And that's always been the true story of *LittleBigPlanet*. As well as any of these games has reviewed at launch, they've only ever been as good as the community made them. The original level design of the first game brought some great tricks and ideas to light, the second game's more open structure and tools lead to some amazing experiences, almost hacking the game. What could be in store from the new characters and 16 planes for adding amazing new depth to experiences?

"I'm sure the community will take that a lot further than we've done," admits Hosen. "We've scratched the surface to a degree… We're just hoping that people who were maybe a bit scared of create before, we're trying to give them a bit of a ladder to create mode. Hopefully we'll achieve that because the people that do dig into create and start making things are really satisfied with that experience. We want to get as many people doing that as possible really."

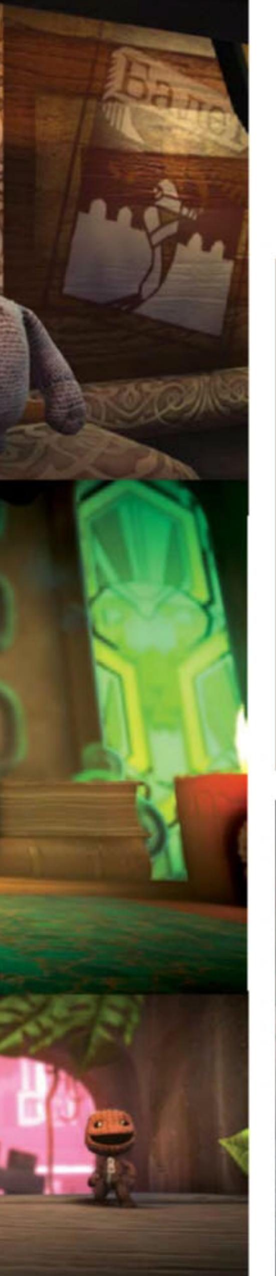
And perhaps the most important legacy of these games is that it brings not just a creative spirit, but a positive one to the gaming world. Much like its creative comrades *Minecraft* and *Project Spark*, *LittleBigPlanet* is a game that any developer can be proud to have worked on according to Hosen. "I've got three kids and I'd be mindful of the kind of games they play. A game like this is just a perfect experience for them. It's not just that it's playful, charming, cute, funny, irreverent and all those things. It's not passive. It's not just about being entertained."

> "Texture resolutions have been enhanced by 4x which means the materials in LBP3 feel more tactile than ever – in full 1080p HD"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT

Above: The wicked new villain, Newton, is just a crazed creator with no work ethic according to Sumo. A commentary on what makes good and bad *LBP* levels? Left: Even if you don't have costumes you can always personalize your characters in *LBP* with liberal application of stickers and fabrics. Below: Teaming up with friends to build levels is going to be really important now that the size of them can be pretty intimidating for a solo builder.

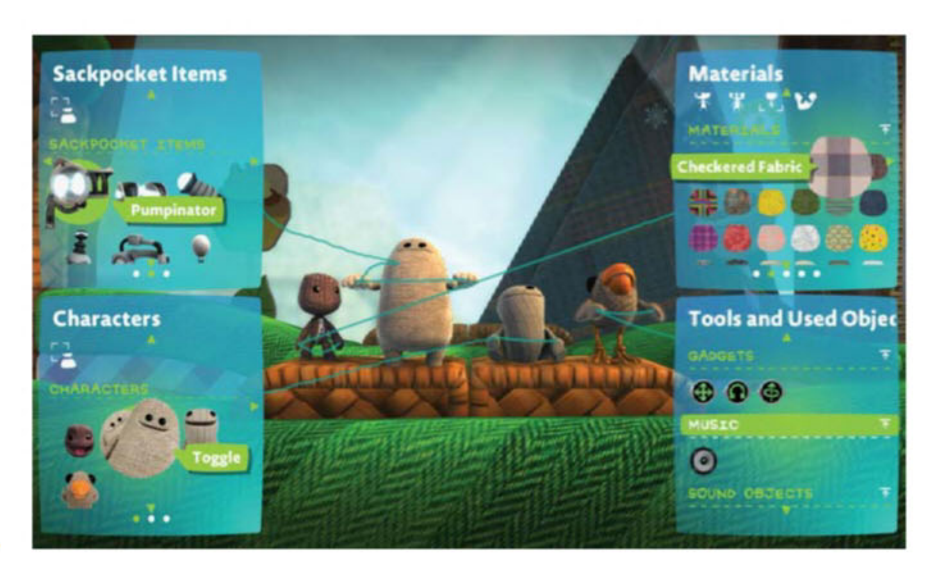


Above: 16 layers of depth is a massive change to the *LBP* landscape, which used to be limited to just three.



SO MANY OPTIONS

LITTLEBIGPLANET HAS continued to grow incrementally and the added capacity and processing power of the PS4 means that everything that's been done before will continue into this new title. "All the tools in *LittleBigPlanet 1* and *2* are here, some of them have been enhanced and we've added another 75 or 80 of our own," Hosen tells us. "We've also brought a lot of the Vita tools over, too. So if you're looking at enhanced tools, new tools and Vita tools, you're talking around 100 plus new tools in this game." What's more, level creation is no longer limited by an in-game thermometer, but rather the capacity of your console instead. You could now make something incredibly complex and detailed.





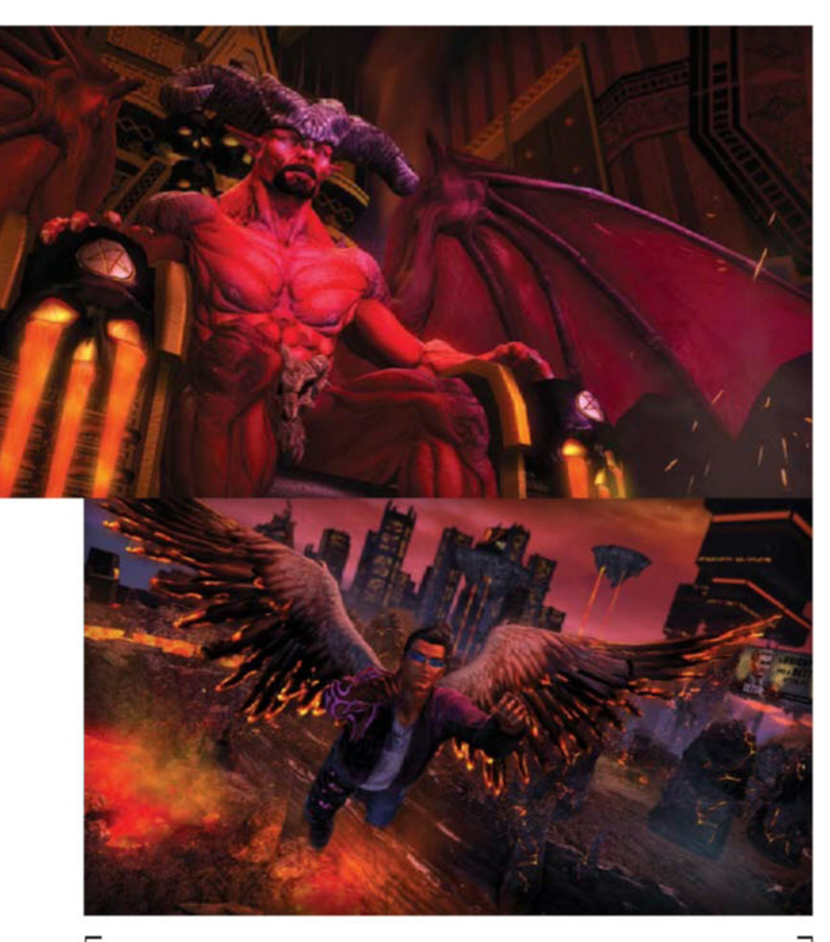
Above: Oddsock, *LBP3*'s 'canine' companion has been embraced by the community pretty fast, not least because he's a wonderfully animated character and has some great gameplay tricks like wall jumping and being able to run at great speed. Left: All of the new playable characters are available for creators in their own levels and can be programmed or given power-ups to suit your designs.





BUILDING THE TOOLBOX

MUCH LIKE MEDIA Molecule before it, Sumo Digital hasn't just come up with cool new ideas for *LittleBigPlanet 3* and dropped them into the game for it to enjoy the benefit alone. Every new addition has to be fed through the principle that it has to be available to the community too. "Everything that we wanted to make, every level type, every power-up type, every gameplay style, the starting point is what tool can we make that lets us do that, because that then means that the community has access to all the same things that we have access to," says Sumo Digital design director Damian Hosen. "That's been a really, really, really important part of what we've done."



Above Easily the best bit about *Gat Out Of Hell* at the moment is being able to fly. The mechanics are easy to pick up and it's the best way to get around New Hades, making good use of its vertical design. We expect there to be a big showdown with Lucifer before the end of this expansion. Expect something tough and possibly ridiculous.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Volition
Release: 27 January 2015
Genre: Action adventure
Players: 1-2

Tecmo Profile

Founded from the division of Parallax Software into two studios in 1996, Volition made its name with games like *FreeSpace* (1998), *Red Faction* (2001) and eventually *Saints Row* (2006).

Tecmo History

FreeSpace: The Great War **1998 [PC]**

Red Faction **2001 [Multi]**

The Punisher **2005 [Multi]**

Saints Row **2006 [Xbox 360]**

High Point

Saints Row: The Third was the culmination of everything Volition had been building, embracing its irreverence to make the ultimate satirical gaming experience.

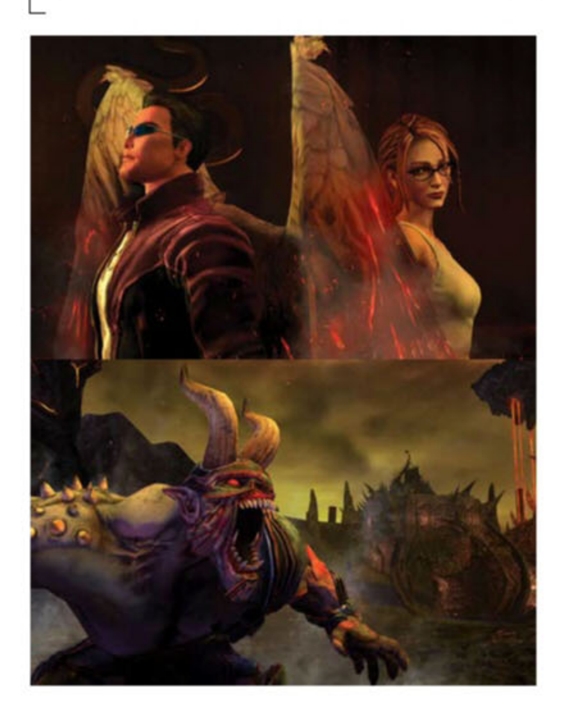
Saints Row: Gat Out Of Hell

CONCEPT The boss has been kidnapped by Satan and it's up to resurrected Johnny Gat to play the hero

Corrupted and devilishly enticing at the same time

It would be easy to mock *Gat Out Of Hell*, but Volition is once again walking the line between incredulous and ridiculous to create something oddly playable. While the joke felt like it was wearing a little thin by the time we got to the end of *Saints Row IV*, getting to play *Gat Out Of Hell* is a nice reminder that we just enjoy blowing the living hell out of things sometimes.

There's not exactly an overabundance of fresh ideas to be found in this expansion, though as it feels very much like a bulky add-on to the previous title rather than any real attempt to push the series forward into the new generation of consoles. There's a sense that toes are being dipped in the water. Volition's hell gets some points for being a pretty large new stretch of real estate to explore and not just being a mirror of Steelport. It even brings a few tweaks to the superhero gameplay we





got to enjoy last time, but adapted with some more spiritually appropriate themes.

For instance we can see flying around New Hades with your angel wings being a highlight of *Gat Out Of Hell*. As has often been the case with the *Saints* games, the controls have been simplified and stripped back to make the experience feel effortless and yet oddly satisfying at the same time. The Hellblazer activities were a particular highlight of our hands on time for this reason as you fly through checkpoints grabbing stamina and boosts along the way. They're basically airborne versions of the Blazin, super powered foot races from the last game, but they're still fun.

/// In a similar vein, the Fraud missions return for *Gat Out Of Hell*, only this time in the form of Torment Fraud where you take over the lost soul of one of hell's damned and shave years off their sentence to the underworld by putting them through the ringer. It plays identically to the old insurance fraud missions, but with that one small narrative twist. It's not much, but it shows that at least a little thought and care (if only a little) has been put into doing this expansion right.

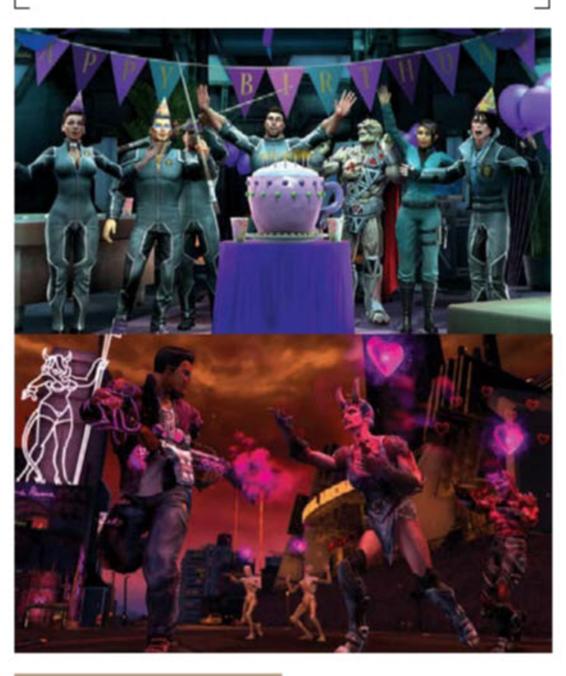
Similar theming has been given to the weapons in the game, with the seven deadly sins being clear inspiration. We're loving the sloth-based armchair gun. A leaning towards crossbows and plenty of scoped weapons was also fun to play with. Simply swinging around a giant hammer also has its benefits.

/// As we played this early build, we couldn't help but notice how empty the world of New Hades felt, though. We're hoping to see some of the extra power of PS4 and Xbox One used to give both the underworld and the re-release of *Saints Row IV* a little population boost and help make the worlds feel livelier. And much like we said about travelling the world of *Saints Row IV*, the additional abilities that come from being a superhero or being in hell make some elements of the game a little redundant. Do we really need to drive cars or bikes anymore for instance when flying is both faster and more fun? It's nice that it's there, but it doesn't feel as enjoyable or integral to the experience as it once did.

> "Historical icons, old friends, older enemies, a talking gun, a full length musical number, and a whole lot of other shenanigans all await you"
>
> DEEP SILVER, PRESS RELEASE

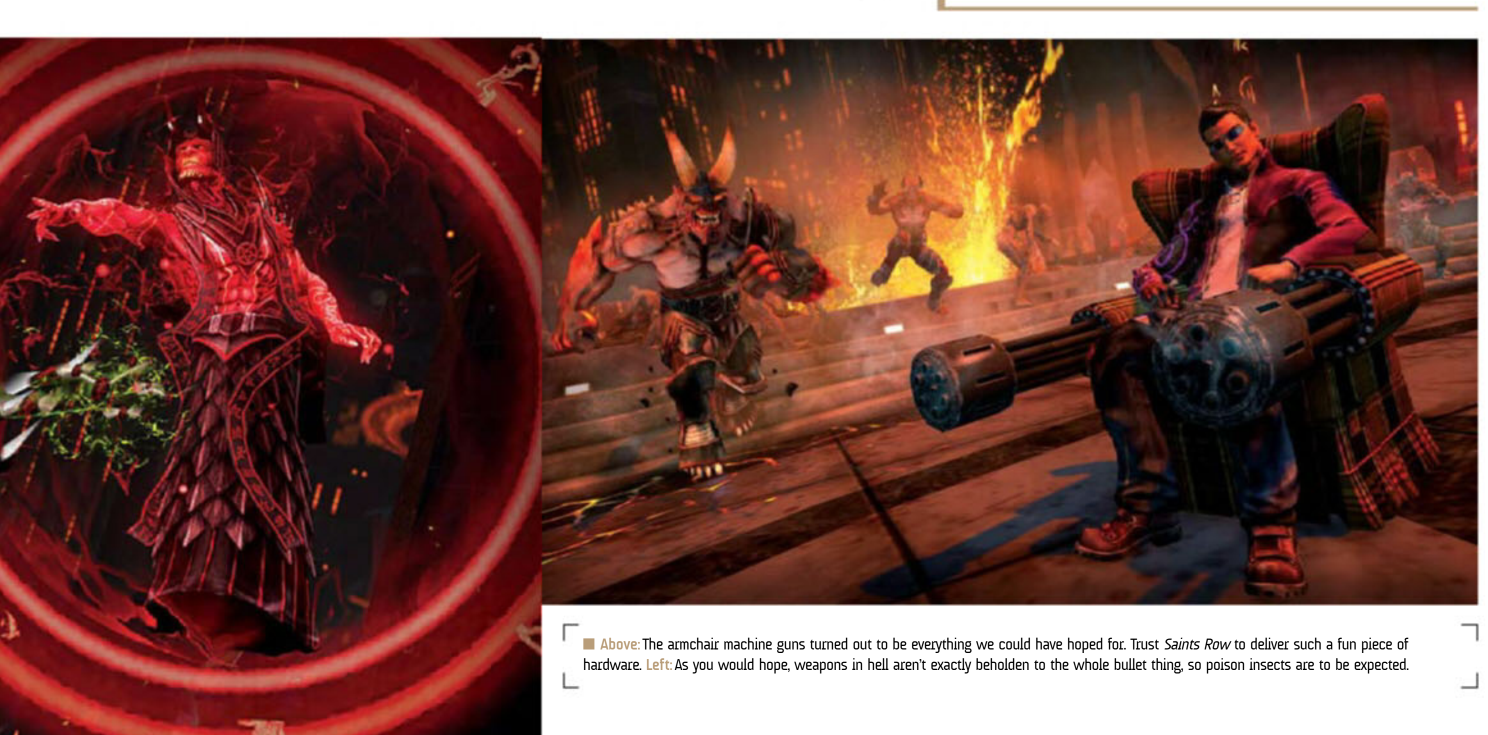
So right now it seems like *Gat Out Of Hell* is carrying with it some of the shortcomings of its forebears, still a little disjointed and a little clumsy. But at its heart *Gat Out Of Hell* still remains a game full of good humour, driven by a love of gaming and setting up ridiculous moments for gamers to enjoy. *Gat Out Of Hell* is going to be a fun introduction for Steelport to the PS4 and Xbox One, particularly when combined with *Saints Row IV*. It won't be the most polished game you play in 2015, but it will be one of the more entertaining.

Below: Weapons inspired by the seven deadly sins should lead to some interesting circumstances in the game. This lust gun could prove problematic for instance.



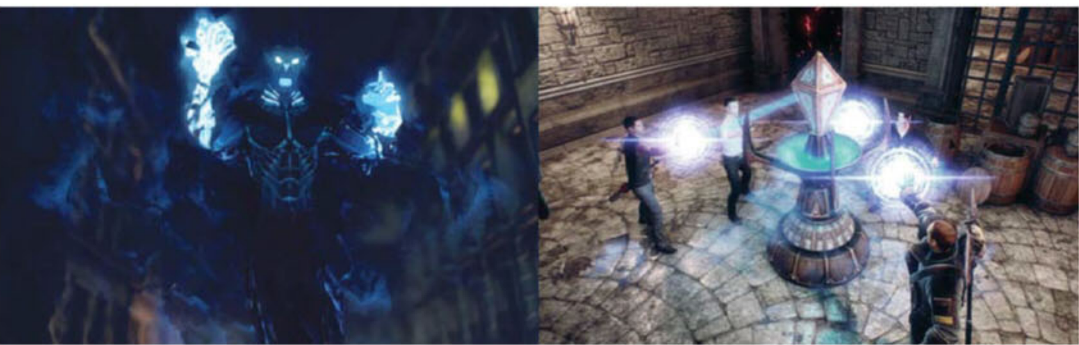
VERTICALLY MOTIVATED

ONE OF THE big things that *Saints Row IV* added was verticality, but that can be tricky to balance when your game is usually very vehicle-based. The progress from President to superhero in *Saints Row IV* allowed you to gradually adjust to travelling Steelport in new ways. If you attack *Gat Out Of Hell* fresh then that gradual build-up will be lost and some of the ground level activities may lose a little of their lustre. You may want to have a little refresher course on the main game just to re-acclimatise yourself, and excellently, *Saints Row IV* will be re-released for PS4 and Xbox One on the same day *Gat Out Of Hell* comes out.



Above: The armchair machine guns turned out to be everything we could have hoped for. Trust *Saints Row* to deliver such a fun piece of hardware. Left: As you would hope, weapons in hell aren't exactly beholden to the whole bullet thing, so poison insects are to be expected.

BioWare used an ARG to help promote the reveal of *Shadow Realms*. Players were told they were chosen and those who followed it through were among the first to get to play the game a short while later.



THE MAGIC RATIO

FOUR VERSUS ONE has fast become a kind of magic formula for making co-op games with a competitive edge. The similarities between *Evolve*, *Fable Legends* and *Shadow Realms* are pretty clear, although all three likely started development around the same time. The decision to have one player control the villain seems smart, and what it creates is the added unpredictability of having a human influence the enemy. It should keep every episode of *Shadow Realms* fresh while also allowing for some replayability, something that's often missing from games structured in this way.

Above: While similar in structure to *Fable Legends*, the gameplay in *Shadow Realms* could be more accurately compared to *Diablo* and its fast-paced gameplay.
Right: According to Jeff Hickman *Shadow Realms* came about as James Ohlen from the Old Republic team wanted to work on something new after so many years on the MMO. They both wanted to get back to the roots of role-playing.





Shadow Realms

CONCEPT ■ Classic role-playing meets modern co-op as four players take on one in a fantasy realm with ghouls, magic, axes and plenty of customisation

Classic BioWare in a brand new format

Honestly, we were hoping for *Mass Effect 4*. Perhaps that's short-sighted of us, but when BioWare said it would be revealing a new game, we hoped it would be the return of the beloved, if awkwardly ended, franchise. So the reveal of *Shadow Realms*, a D&D-inspired co-op RPG with an initially fascinating but now (bizarrely) rather common four versus one mechanic felt like more of an anticlimax than it should have done.

You play as one of a number of Heroes who wake up in the modern world suddenly with magical powers and get pulled into the realm of Embra. There you must fight the Shadow Legions led by the Shadowlords (also player characters) and save humanity. So far, so familiar, but actually Shadow Realms is all about mixing the familiar with highly contrasting elements. For instance there are one of six classes to pick from currently, Warrior, Assassin, Wizard, Cleric, Ranger and Warlock but each starts out in modern clothing. As the game progresses you could augment this with items from Embra, turning yourself into an office worker wizard or punk rock medic.

Even within your class, there's a lot to pick from. BioWare has described for instance how different battle situations and team balances may lead you to switch up your focus. A Medic might move from direct healing to team healing moves for instance if they're constantly being overwhelmed. Every class has variations to it and that's before we even get into the array of weapons you can customise your hero with. From guns to battle axes, the modern and the fantastic mix happily in *Shadow Realms* and they all tweak how you play a little.

The action is very fast-paced, forgoing some of the stop-start gameplay you would find in a single-player BioWare adventure like *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age*. This is much more direct and instantly gratifying. It has yet to show us much depth yet, but talk of increasing challenge that forces class refocusing and weapon customisation does hold much promise. Likewise, the world design of Embra is rather generic, but since your characters are supposed to be from our world, we wouldn't be surprised to see things spill back over. Again, there's promise here.

What's more is that the episodic structure BioWare will be using to release the game is an interesting move. Similar to *Fable Legends* on Xbox One, *Shadow Realms* will release in several parts and that could mean very different approaches in each one. Not to mention BioWare's trademark narrative control handed to the player, which may lead to some very varied story lines and a good reason to go back and play through again.

/// Playing as the Shadowlord is the more challenging side of the game, acting as the dungeon master and laying traps for your prey. Using a magic meter, your ability to spawn enemies and contraptions is limited, but it increases over time, so you should be able to spring some nasty surprises on your competitors. You also have the option of acting as a direct agent in the battle, possessing one of your minions, not unlike Harbinger in *Mass Effect 2*, so you can be a part of the fight. When this happens, though, the players will be able to tell it's going on by a blue glowing orb above the head of the creature you're commanding. But when that creature could be the level boss, knowing and doing something about it are two very separate things.

> "This game brings us back to our roots in the realm of classic pen and paper RPGs"
>
> **JEFF HICKMAN,** GENERAL MANAGER AND VP, BIOWARE AUSTIN

There's something very interesting about the split nature of *Shadow Realms*; modern and yet inspired by classic RPG tropes; confined into episodes, but showing hints at classic BioWare scope. It shows signs of a studio that's looking to break out from its traditional standing and find new ways of engaging players, but is still standing fairly firmly on ground that it finds familiar and striking out from there. We're intrigued to see what BioWare will be revealing next for its first new IP in five years, not least if it might reach beyond PC and land on consoles eventually too.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: BioWare Austin
Release: TBC 2015
Players: 1-5

Developer Profile

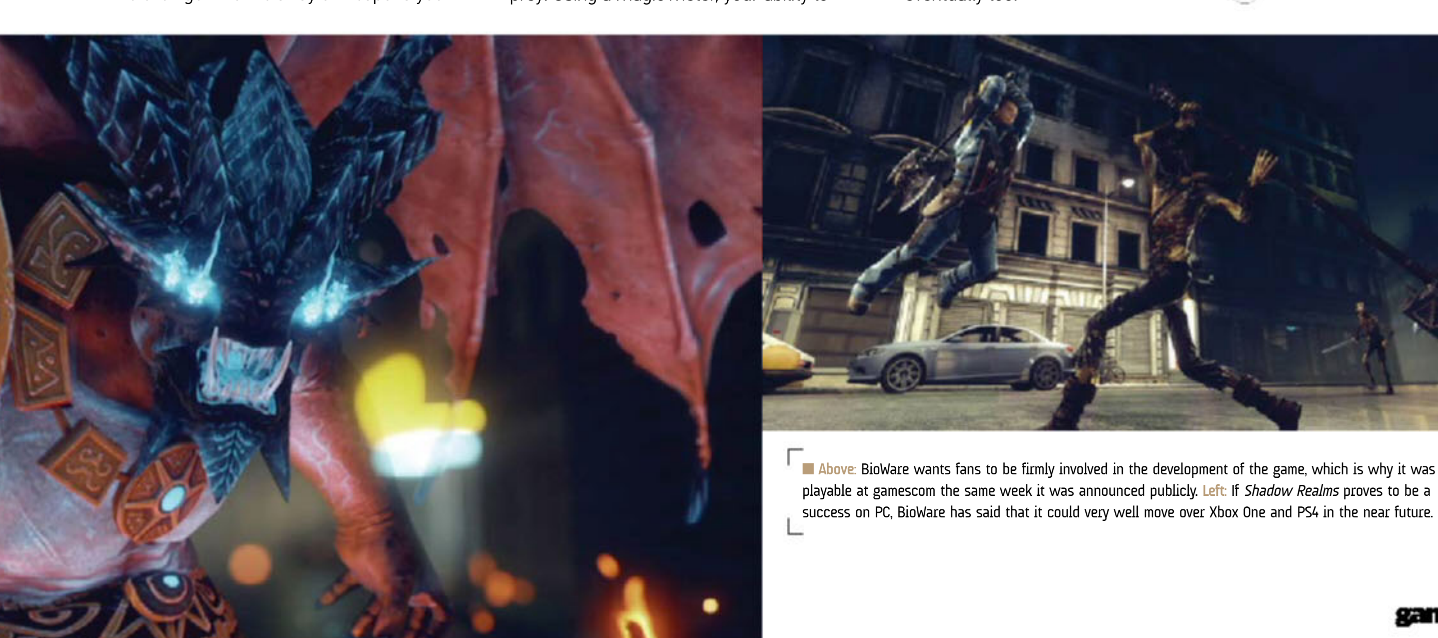
As a designer on *Baldur's Gate* and later lead designer on *Knights Of The Old Republic*, James Ohlen has worked his way up at BioWare. Now senior creative director he's heading up this intriguing mash-up of the gothic and modern in co-op RPG form.

Developer History

Jade Empire
2005 [Multi]
Dragon Age: Origins
2009 [Multi]
Star Wars: The Old Republic
2011 [PC]
Mass Effect 3
2012 [Multi]

High Point

Heading up the design team on BioWare's *Star Wars* MMO was the culmination of many year's work, starting from BioWare's first game *Shattered Steel*.



■ Above: BioWare wants fans to be firmly involved in the development of the game, which is why it was playable at gamescom the same week it was announced publicly. Left: If *Shadow Realms* proves to be a success on PC, BioWare has said that it could very well move over Xbox One and PS4 in the near future.

■ Hotwire is a very exciting new game mode for *Hardline* that is a mixture of capture the flag and a classic police chase sequence. Crooks must steal marked cars and the police have to chase and stop them.



POLICE AND POLITICS

VISCERAL PROBABLY WASN'T expecting to face much political backlash against its setting for *Hardline*, given that the subject of American soldiers fighting abroad would seem more obviously eyebrow raising than enforcing the law on American soil. However, the militarisation of the police in *Battlefield* has drawn uncomfortable parallels with accusations of excessive force by police forces around the world. It was a hot-button issue that Visceral was aware of, however, so it's chosen situations that would appear fairly black and white in terms of police response.

■ Above: The Frostbite Engine is delivering some incredible visuals once again. *Hardline* was actually in development for more than a year before *Battlefield 4* was even released, so it's had plenty of time to polish to its current state. Right: There's a real *Far Cry* feel to a lot of what we're seeing from *Hardline*. It's not as open, but it's taking all the right cues from Ubisoft's series.





Battlefield Hardline

CONCEPT ■ The classic sandbox gameplay of *Battlefield* moved from the dusty theatres of war to the much more treacherous streets of North America, as cops and crooks face each other down

The battle for hearts and minds

***Hardline* is in trouble. Development appears to be moving along okay, and a delay to release gives both Visceral and DICE more time to optimise and innovate.** The gameplay we've seen so far is impressive, so there are no worries there. The trouble this game is in has more to do with convincing long-time fans of the series that they won't get burned this time around. It could be losing the battle for hearts and minds.

There hasn't been this much concern expressed about an upcoming *Battlefield* game since it first made the move from PC to console back in 2005. That was a question of transition and translating controls from a purely PC game to the 'limitations' of a gamepad. There was also worry from the PC hardcore that it would lead to a watered-down *Battlefield* experience. For Hardline, the concern is simply, will it be playable at launch? After the disaster of *Battlefield 4*'s appearance last year, that's actually a fairly valid question.

Visceral is confident, not least because it convinced EA to push the game back into 2015 for more development time. While this was more likely to be for Visceral to better implement its plan for *Battlefield*'s single-player, it can't do any harm in terms of giving DICE the chance to fine-tune its online experience and get it in good shape for the launch. The only real concern left as far as **games™** is concerned is whether or not this new format for the series and new setting will hold up in the face of improved and innovating opposition. The gameplay for *Hardline* is regularly intense and often insane, in ways only a *Battlefield* game can be. The destructible environments, levolutions and combustible elements that once felt so logical in a theatre of war seem almost insane in a cops versus robbers scenario. As urban locations are torn to pieces by gunfire and crashing vehicles, the chaos is almost gut-wrenching to see. Perhaps that's a compliment to the job being done, but it can appear a little jarring.

For once it's the single-player that we have less to be concerned about. What's been revealed so far is evidence enough of Visceral's confidence and patience in building a single-player experience. Having perhaps looked at how Ubisoft managed to merge sandbox locations with a solo story in *Far Cry 3*, *Hardline* feels like the kind of playground we've always enjoyed from this series, with the added bonus of some real weight to its narrative. The action can still get pretty out of hand, but being able to play in a stealthy way, finding and arresting rather than killing key targets, and generally playing as a cop offers a completely new experience through the prism of the Frostbite Engine than we've seen before.

/// There's a freshness to *Hardline* that can seemingly only come from a new set of eyes taking a stab at the franchise. The pacing feels different, the story feels fairly unique and even personal rather than empty and generic. And while there's no question that the movement from location to location is only really an excuse to throw you from one gameplay scenario to another, each is unique enough and cool enough to be worthwhile. Dare we say, there's a hint of the original *Modern Warfare* about how this is being structured and pulled off.

The only thing left that might need a little tweaking is the single-player AI. While having plenty of fairly easy targets to point your gun at certainly isn't a bad thing, we've been rather shocked by the willingness of *Hardline*'s thugs to stand next to perfectly protective cover in the face of machine gun fire rather than leaping behind it. Self-preservation seems to be low on the list of priorities for the criminal element facing you down. Over the course of the game, we can see this beginning to grate as it pulls you out of what would otherwise be quite an immersive and engrossing time. Visceral is going to need to use those extra months of development wisely.

> "This is an awesome opportunity to take one of gaming's most exciting franchises in a new direction"
>
> STEVE PAPOUTSIS, VICE PRESIDENT AND GENERAL MANAGER, VISCERAL GAMES

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4, Xbox 360, PS3
Origin: California, USA
Publisher: EA
Developer: Visceral Games
Release: TBC 2015
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

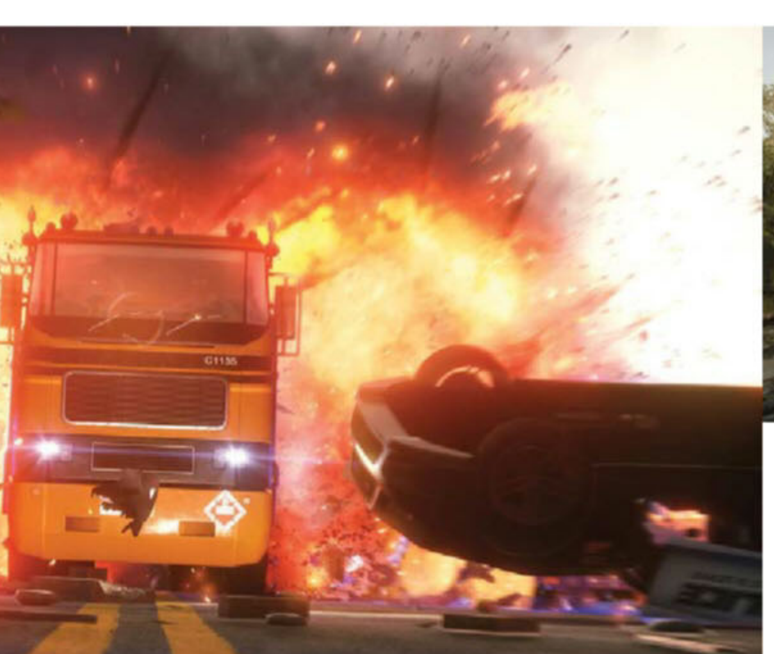
Founded back in 1998, Visceral (formerly EA Redwood Shores) has been a loyal servant of its parent company, earning its stripes on licensed titles like *James Bond* and *The Godfather*.

Developer History

The Godfather II **2009 [Multi]**
Dante's Inferno **2010 [Multi]**
Dead Space 2 **2011 [Multi]**
Dead Space 3 **2013 [Multi]**
Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel **2013 [Multi]**

High Point

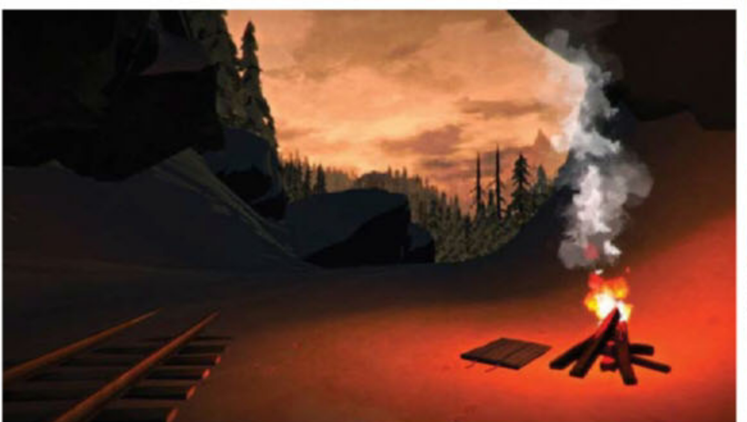
Launching its own new IP in *Dead Space* was a turning point for the studio, breaking it free of licensed game-making and leading it to working on *Battlefield* and a *Star Wars* game.

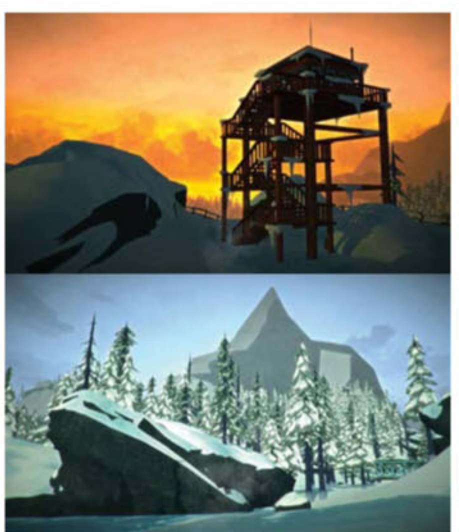




■ Above: Overall, the gameplay is much more like traditional *Battlefield* in multiplayer than some might have expected. This isn't just a larger *Payday 2* Left: The arrival of a tanker on the field of battle will likely see players scattering to the wind. These things bring about ungodly levels of destruction in urban areas.

Below: The textures and models of *The Long Dark* are simple, but they are so tightly clustered together and expertly realised that it creates a beautifully stylised and lush world to explore.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC/Mac/Linux
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Hinterland
Developer: In-house
Release: Q4 2014
Genre: Survival
Players: 1

Developer Profile

With former *Relic* producer Raphael van Lierop and famed *God Of War* and *Shank* scribe Marianne Krawczyk as founding members, Hinterland has a fine background in making triple-A games behind it. That polish and detail comes through nicely even in this early version of *The Long Dark*.

Developer History

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War
PC [2004]
God Of War
PS2 [2005]
Company Of Heroes
PC [2006]
Shank
Multi [2010]

High Point

The *God Of War* trilogy stands out as probably the biggest commercial and critical success of anyone at Hinterland at the moment. *The Long Dark* is very different and smaller, but still looks very good.

The Long Dark

CONCEPT After a catastrophic geomagnetic event you are stranded in the middle of a harsh wilderness. With limited supplies your only task is to survive

The night is dark and full of terrors

Beautiful and deadly is the best way we can describe *The Long Dark.* As our early access hands-on time with the game has proven, this is a purist survival game with very little by the way of bells or whistles in terms of challenges, but plenty invested in the atmosphere and art style to make it one of the more compelling vanilla experiences we've seen in a while.

We spent a little time in the sandbox mode for the game, wandering the wilderness, attempting to collect resources where we could find them, watching our calorie intake to make sure we had enough energy to get around while keeping an eye out for wolves. It was tense and exhausting stuff at times and that's without the zombies, vampires, aliens or marauders you might typically expect in a game like this. Instead you simply have to battle the cold, hunger, thirst and wildlife, but that's more than enough to keep you busy.

The Mystery Lake location of this early and evolving build of the game has a great mix of wood cabins, empty tundra, frozen lakes and limited wildlife to keep you guessing and foraging for a good long while. Our first few playthroughs were met with swift death, though, as we adjusted to the demands of the game. As you get dropped randomly into what appears to be a national park region, getting your bearings and heading for the nearest shelter is crucial. You need to find warmer clothing, tools and scrap for repairing items and, if you're lucky, a weapon of some kind, because those wolves don't mess around.

We lost count of how many times we were killed by the lupine threat in *The Long Dark*. While flares can sometimes scare them away, they didn't always do us much good and at night, stumbling through the pitch darkness in a snow storm, seeing their glowing yellow eyes in the distance was enough for us to push the keyboard aside and restart from scratch. Why go through the torment of being mauled to death again?

> "We want to be part of the incredible crowdfunding revolution, and create a direct relationship with our players"
>
> RAPHAEL VAN LIEROP, HINTERLAND

But it is all so engrossing, not least because it's a gorgeously realised world and the simple, painted art style offers so much life to what would otherwise be a very bland game. Throw in some light sources indoors or even the Aurora Borealis in the sky and we wouldn't blame you for staring at it with wonder (but don't, because your insides are eating themselves). What the episodic story content will bring to this game we're keen to discover, but even if it was only this open sandbox experience this would already be an easy game for us to recommend you keep an eye on.



Above: Resource management is incredibly important, but the most challenging thing to maintain will be your own energy levels, especially between shelters.

Never Alone

CONCEPT A young girl and an arctic fox band together to explore Native Alaskan folklore, stories and mythologies

We come from the land of the ice and snow

Never Alone is also known as 'Kisima Inŋitchuŋa' – the Iñupiaq translation of the games title. We mention this because it serves to illustrate that *Never Alone* is unique in the videogame landscape. It's a game that's been made with a clearly defined ethical standpoint – to be as inclusive and respectful of the Alaskan Native culture as it possibly can. The whole game has been put together by a 12-person strong development team, who kept in constant contact with Alaskan storytellers throughout the project to keep their development informed. It was a balanced production all the way through, something bigger developers can lose sight of with a large, fractured team.

Upper One Games and E-Line Media began their partnership with *Never Alone* in hopes to lay the foundations for a series that shares and celebrates cultures around the world, with *Never Alone* aimed at exploring the universal theme of what it is to be human in this world, and how stories can translate across generations and cultures through their messages alone. The game ships with a documentary, too: as you earn achievements or trophies, you unlock chapters of a beautifully filmed study of the local culture, featuring interviews with the developers, and local storytellers, wildlife-spotting scenes and amazing time-lapses of the arctic wonderland in which *Never Alone* is set.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: E-Line Media
Developer: Upper One Games
Release: Q4 2014
Players: 2

Developer Profile

Upper One Games is an initiative launched by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, operating out of Anchorage, Alaska. Oddly enough, the publisher (E-Line Media) also has a large hand in developing the title – giving production credits to both sides of the team.

High Point

Though a relatively new company, publisher E-Line Media features staff that have worked on titles ranging from the *SOCOM* series to *Rage* and *Tomb Raider* – the publisher has a lot of experience under its belt.

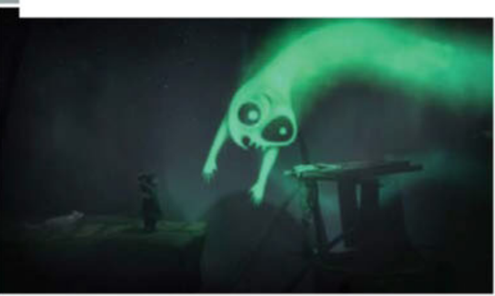


ANOTHER LEVEL

THE LEVEL DESIGN is reminiscent of *Limbo* on a superficial level – the art design (which came from original bone etchings done by Iñupiaq natives) is reminiscent of *Limbo*'s claustrophobic darkness, certainly, but the game actually plays more like *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* or *Valiant Hearts*; rather than a focus on a singular character, puzzles and levels are built around co-operation and dual dynamics, leading to a more satisfying puzzle experience.

THIS SEEMS FAMILIAR...

UPPER ONE GAMES is keen on introducing you to the mythology and culture that has informed Iñupiaq culture for the last few centuries. The game's narrative was penned after the developers sat down with storytellers in the Alaskan community and managed to translate the verbal sagas into tangible gameplay. As such, you can expect spiritual familiars, friendly spectres and projections of nature (such as the embodiment of the Aurora Borealis, pictured) to accompany you through your journey.



ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

THE CORE GAMEPLAY will revolve around switching between Nuna and her fox familiar in efforts to solve puzzles scattered around the arctic landscape. The game will feature a co-op mode, too, so two players can work together and sort through the shadowed, snowy environments in unison. The game is built to promote intergenerational relationships as well, so it's the kind of casual experience you can enjoy with your family as well as your friends.



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Final Fantasy XV

CONCEPT ■ Travelling further away from the turn-based battle system, *XV* takes a lot of cues from *Kingdom Hearts*, and wants to present itself as a much darker *Final Fantasy* experience

To be or Noct to be?

Ever since *VII* tore down the walls between Japanese development and the mainstream Western audience, the series has been torn between its roots and its future. The series has always strived to deliver fresh mechanics to the RPG – usually revolving around innovative levelling systems or ambitious battle mechanics – but alas, there's no pleasing everybody. Square Enix has received criticism for taking *Final Fantasy* down a more casual route as the franchise has aged, but *XV* promises to hit directly upon that almost mythical barrier between hardcore and casual – director Hajime Tabata wants the title to retain the depth of mechanic the series is known for whilst providing an easy point of access to casual players. It sounds like Square Enix is trying to appeal to everyone – a dangerous tactic: if it fails, it could easily appeal to exactly no-one. Here are five things we hope will make sure the game hits both prospective audiences:

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-House
Release: TBC
Genre: RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Square Enix used to be two companies – SquareSoft and Enix, each taking their own spin on the RPG that was dominating the Japanese market. Since the companies merged, Square Enix has breached Western development, too – responsible for publishing *Deus Ex*, *Thief* and *Tomb Raider*.

Developer History

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn
Multi [2013]
Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance
3DS [2012]
Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together
PSP [2010]

High Point

Final Fantasy VIII is basically a love story, told with the recognisable elements of *Final Fantasy* games. It was easy to break, granted, but its evocative, emotional story is rarely matched, even today

1 IT'S THEMATICALLY TIED TO FINAL FANTASY XIII…

WE KNOW that Square Enix used Lightning and her convoluted story so much that her mythos and universe became mundane, but the Fabula Nova Crystallis mythology has so much more depth to it than the odd iterations of Lightning's world makes out. *Final Fantasy XV* will somehow be related to Light in regards to its world; we assume that connection will lie in the gods that orchestrate inter-world events, since *XV* and the *XIII* trilogy have completely different domestic realms to play their stories out in. The upcoming *Final Fantasy Type-0 HD* is also connected by the Fabula Nova Crystallis moniker. We really want the chance to explore this universe some more.


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> "Tabata and the entire development team are working, whole-heartedly, towards completing the production of Final Fantasy XV and ensuring the delivery of the highest quality Final Fantasy title to date"

YOSUKE MATSUDA, SQUARE ENIX CEO

2 IT PLAYS LIKE DMC MEETS KINGDOM HEARTS WITH SOME FFXII THROWN IN…

THE BATTLE system evolves the Gambit system used in *Final Fantasy XII* – where you can assign abilities to your team which they automatically use in battles. Add to that realistic reactive animations (get hurt and your team-mates will help you up) and you got yourself one of the most realistic battle engines *Final Fantasy* has ever seen. Tabata has stated his intentions to make it a 'one-button' system, but don't let that deter your interest: that means switching weapons on the fly and chaining combos together with protagonist Noctis' 'blink'-like ability. It's all very quick, and very involving.

3 IT BRINGS BACK SUMMONS…

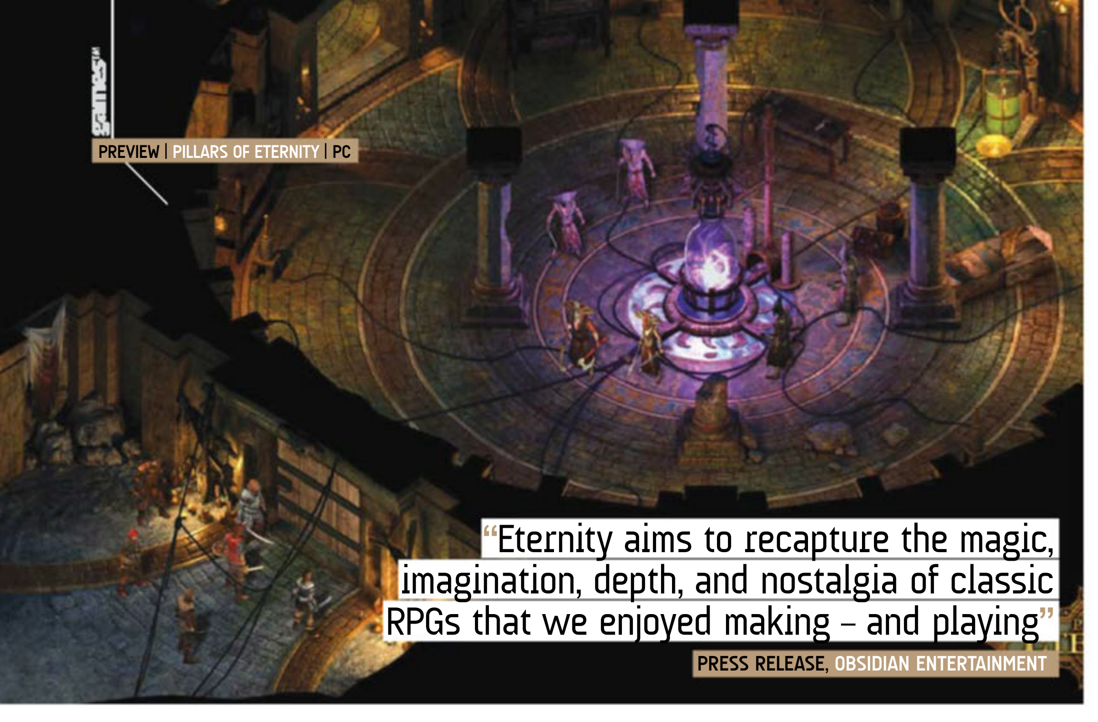
THE BATTLE system only gets deeper the more time you spend exploring its intricacies; if you set up a combo, you can galvanise the damage it does by jumping into mechs or tanks around the map or even by calling Summons. No *Final Fantasy* is complete without Shiva, Ifrit, Bahamut et al, so their presence in *XV* is reassuring (and we're also looking forward to seeing beautiful new animations for them): the fact they're also arranged by class and then subdivided into ranks promises a whole slew of them – we just hope that Square Enix brings back Giant Cactuar. Failing that, we'd be happy with just having to run around the world collecting them.

4 IT'S A FANTASY BASED IN REALITY

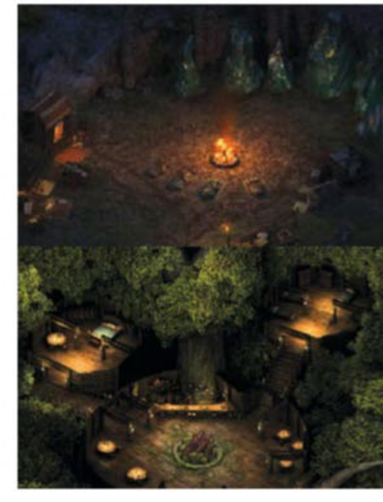
THOUGH THE game will retain *Final Fantasy*'s penchant for sprawling, apocalyptic, god-centric stories, original director and writer of the game Tetsuya Nomura wanted to make the central cast of characters far more realistic – more human and refined – and bring in elements of the real world to galvanise the fantastical element within. Noctis' home kingdom of Lucis, for example, has an incredibly Japanese flavour – based heavily on the developer's local Shinjuku district in Tokyo. Even the police cars look identical – this is a game firmly rooted in a realistic world over a purely fantastic one, akin to *Final Fantasy VII*.

5 IT TAKES ADVANTAGE OF ALL FINAL FANTASY TEAMS

FINAL FANTASY XV has been in development since 2006, when it was still known as *Versus XIII*, and as such has the benefit of seeing a variety of Square Enix's teams apply their specific knowledge to the project. The talented animation squad behind fan service feature film *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* are taking care of the sure-to-be-beautiful cutscenes (presented in cinematic 21:9 aspect ratio) whilst the *Kingdom Hearts II* development team take care of the action. We hope it continues to be a productive relationship, rather than a 'too many Quinas spoil the broth' scenario…



> "Eternity aims to recapture the magic, imagination, depth, and nostalgia of classic RPGs that we enjoyed making – and playing"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT



■ *Pillars Of Eternity* takes all the best bits of the classic RPG and re-does it all with an HD flourish. It looks absolutely stunning.

Pillars Of Eternity

CONCEPT ■ The exploration of *Baldur's Gate* meets the dungeon-crawling combat of *Icewind Dale* whilst taking narrative cues from *Planescape: Torment* – a recipe for success, or too many cooks spoiling the broth?

The closest thing you're ever going to get to a new Baldur's Gate

In an industry where the console market steals all the headlines (and most of the funding) the hardcore PC gamer can often feel over-looked. Enter Kickstarter, and the slew of PC-only games that took to crowdfunding as a means to prove there's still a market for the kind of game that can only be played with a mouse and keyboard. Obsidian Entertainment is no stranger to the RPG, having cut its teeth on *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic II* and established itself further with the hit *Neverwinter Nights* follow-up, the studio has proved itself in almost every facet of the RPG, so to see Obsidian hit almost $4 million on KickStarter is reassuring.

Pillars Of Eternity plans to hit upon the nostalgic buzz generated by the memories of *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale* or *Planescape: Torment*. Obsidian wants to do that by powering *Pillars* with an engine that spiritually encapsulates the Infinity Engine – *Pillars* has an extensive character creation system that underpins traditional tabletop roleplaying-inspired gaming: deep, complex inventory systems, sprawling, text-based worlds leading to labyrinthine dungeons, and a visual style that instantly evokes Infinity-rendered memories all come together to create something that feels familiar in the best possible way. There's an open beta, accessible to backers of the KickStarter, that showcases the game's D&D inspirations and multiple-threaded narrative intentions. This side of the game – even in its pre-release phrase – is everything a gamer hungering for pre-millennium RPGs is after, but the combat currently leaves a lot to be desired.

You're going to have a busy team – with so many complementary classes and abilities, most of the game will revolve around getting the perfect setup – and having them all throw themselves at enemies just ends up a mess. Different character models overlap and swarm around each other, negating any attempt you make to manually select a character. The effort-to-reward system seems a little lax, too: it's possible that because the beta is a vertical slice of the game, the loot and items you receive post-combat are unbalanced, but from what we've played, we hope Obsidian makes some dramatic changes to the way combat works and rewards you before the final release hits this Christmas. Other than that, *Pillars* looks like a watertight RPG, and one that players disillusioned with current console RPGs will really appreciate.

Obsidian is keeping a lot of the game under wraps at the moment, but the world we've seen so far looks complete and vivid.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac, Linux
Origin: USA
Publisher: Paradox Interactive
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
Release: Q4 2014
Genre: RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Though Obsidian has created its own IP, the studio seems more comfortable working in previously established universes. Sequels, licences and spin-offs have been Obsidian's most successful ventures, so we hope its own RPG world in *Pillars of Eternity* is a success.

Developer History

Neverwinter Nights 2
PC, Mac [2006]
Alpha Protocol
Xbox 360, PS3, PC [2010]
South Park: The Stick Of Truth
Xbox 360, PS3, PC [2014]

High Point

Fallout: New Vegas took all the best parts of Bethesda's instant classic *Fallout 3* and extended their collective lifespan – letting gamers enter the Wasteland for a whole new experience





Dead Island 2

CONCEPT ■ It's California as you've never seen it before: full of zombified, shabbily-clothed vagabonds… oh hang on…

Welcome to the Danger Zone

Dead Island 2 was originally supposed to be developed by the studio behind the original – Techland – who instead signed a deal with Warner Bros. to go and take their expertise across to *Dying Light* (which is, ironically enough, perhaps *Dead Island 2*'s biggest rival). Publisher Deep Silver shopped the IP around, until Yager approached the company, with a pitch in hand and a vision in mind. The deal went off without a hitch – arguably bolstered by Yager's seditious and rebellious approach to game design in previous triple-A title *Spec Ops: The Line*. We caught up with Isaac Ashdown, gameplay programmer for Yager, about the direction the studio wants to take the fledging IP, and the unique opportunities afforded to the game by the genre it's working in.

Has *Dead Island 2* predominantly been made as a single-player game, or would you describe it as more of a cooperative experience than the previous titles in the series have been?

The co-op was a big selling point for a lot of people in the first game, and people still play co-op today, years after the game came out. We really wanted to take that set of features and make them really shine. So you can now have up to eight players in the world at the same time, and you'll often find yourself playing through what feels like a single-player game and finding it populated with other players who are doing their own thing. In a few cases you can compete, but generally you can do what you like around them. Co-op is very much how we envisioned the game to be played. That said, you can also not have your internet on, play it alone, and enjoy it just as much.

What is *Dead Island 2* doing that will set it distinctly apart from its genre rivals – the *Dying Lights* and *Sunset Overdrives* of the world?

We're making a sequel to a game that in itself was a departure from other games in the genre – being so bright and colourful, being so intense and visceral despite being first-person – we're taking a lot of those points and running with them. Other games do things differently – whether that's going down a darker, more moody route, or doing things in a super-crazy, over-the-top way, while we still want to make it serious: the world is still out to get you, and you may be a hero, but that doesn't mean you're invincible. We've got an interesting combination of having a very serious setting, but compounding that with people who see it as an opportunity to live the life they always dreamed… I think it's kinda unique.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Yager Development
Release: Q2 2015
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Yager was founded in 1999 by a team of five programmers and artists. Now with 100+ staff, the studio has only released three games to date.

Developer History

Yager
2003 [Xbox, PC]
Aerial Strike: Low Altitude – High Skies
2005 [PC]
Spec Ops: The Line
2012 [PC, Xbox 360, PS3]

High Point

Spec Ops: The Line felt very empowering, before making you take a good hard look at yourself.

Dead Island 2 isn't just about moving from place to place with a variety of boring attacks – you can also perform pretty grotesque executions: prepare to see that zombie's head fly like a baseball…

In our hands-on, we were very impressed with how well crowds acted and moved – next-gen is truly here!

Yager is a studio that's gotten quite a reputation for deconstructing games tropes since *Spec Ops: The Line*… will we see that same kind of philosophy in *Dead Island 2* and what sort of ideas are you looking to explore?

Dead Island 2 is actually a fairly big departure for Yager, and that's actually quite a fun thing for a developer to be able to do. Jumping from one genre to another, from one theme to another, is refreshing – but that said, there's certainly going to be a bit of Yager's signature in the game, I guess, in terms of how we construct the world…

Spec Ops had a very traditional story structure, but *Dead Island 2* is more emergent, so we're layering that with personal stories for other characters, personal story for *your* character, and blending that together in a way that allows for (almost) endless replayability.

Zombie games allow you to be more violent and gruesome with your content – *Dead Island 2*'s 'executions' and 'fury attacks', for example. This is something typically frowned upon in non-zombie games. Was it fun working with these systems?

> "We really wanted to take Dead Island's set of features and make them really shine"
>
> ISAAC ASHDOWN, GAMEPLAY PROGRAMMER, YAGER

Those systems are things I'm directly responsible for, and on a personal level, that's the reason I got into this business. Working on crazy ideas – or taking other people's crazy ideas and making them work in-game, it's great. Working with the animators to make sure everything feels slick and awesome – it's a fun challenge. But you can't disassociate yourself from the impact [games like this] have in wider culture. Our setting and genre allow us to do a lot of fun things, but you always have to be aware of what you're doing – of how you fit into the bigger spectrum.

INTO THE UNCANNY VALLEY

"One thing we've done in *Dead Island* is scan in the faces of real people," explains Ashdown when we ask him how *Dead Island 2* looks so real, "so devs, our friends and family are all in there. The other day, someone I was pretty close to had finally made it in. I was playing the game and I found him playing as one of our human enemies and it was pretty entertaining to see him in this little house, in a backroom, with a shotgun, a pile of dead bodies around him, trash talking these zombies."

You seem to have spent a considerable amount of time working on the class system to balance co-op play. Can you tell us what the difference is between how the class system works compared to the original *Dead Island*?

In a way we've taken the exact same systems we had in *Dead Island* and just ramped them up – so you'll still have skill points and skill trees to explore, and depending on which class you choose (out of the speeder, the bishop, the hunter and the berserker), you'll notice the game plays very differently, too. We want to allow for lots of different play styles to come through with that – you know, it's really all about replayability.

And what's been your favourite class to play as so far?

Personally, I like playing the bishop, but I can't tell you why *just* yet…

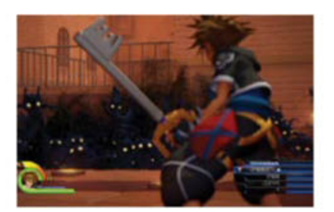


SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

KINGDOM HEARTS III

Format: **Xbox One, PS4**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



KINGDOM HEARTS III has had a development history plagued by inconsistencies and interruptions. Firstly, Square Enix took Tetsuya Nomura away from his *Final Fantasy XV* project to work on the game (something he's recently said he's frustrated about) and now the game has been ported to be built in Unreal Engine 4. It's not the engine we would have chosen – but Square knows what it's doing… right?

RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS 2

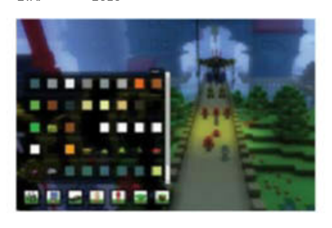
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Spring 2015**



WHERE RESIDENT *Evil Revelations* was set between the events of *Resident Evil 4* and *5*, *Revelations 2* will continue the trend and fall between *5* and *6*. The game plays almost exactly the same as the first instalment, though includes a character-switching mechanic so players can flit between Claire and *Resi* newcomer Moira Burton. The game is a refreshing change to the struggling *Resident Evil* franchise.

ADVENTURE BOX

Format: **Browser**
Publisher: **Happy Landlord**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



A MINECRAFT-inspired voxel-based world, *Adventure Box* is ambitious – it's split between two major modes: Adventure Maker and Adventure Player. Maker is practically *Minecraft*; you can build worlds, shape the sea, the sky and input your own narrative. Adventure Player is more of a traditional RPG – you create your own character and set out to explore pre-determined worlds, made with the same tools players access in-game.

PATHOLOGIC

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Ice-Pick Lodge**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



"12 DAYS in a town devoured by plague," reads *Pathologic*'s tag-line pitch, "it's an enemy you can't kill. It's a game where you can't save everyone." Funded on KickStarter, *Pathologic* is a game promising choices that have real consequences – play as one of three enigmatic outsiders, and your presence in the town has the ability to save the lives of most people, or end up in a contained genocide. It's dark and gloriously directed.

BEDLAM

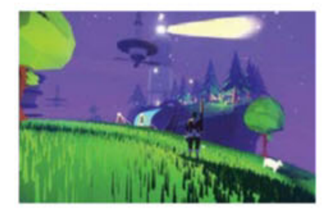
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Skyshine Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



BUILT ON the same engine as *The Banner Saga* (with an overhaul to combat mechanics), *Bedlam* is a game that pretty much brings the world of Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series to life. *Bedlam* is an SRPG that pits you – the Mechanic – against roving bandits, operating from your mobile fortress (Dozer). *Bedlam* scratches an itch we've had since *Fallout Tactics* rumours started years ago.

IZLE

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One, Wii U**
Publisher: **Area effect**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



IZLE COMES from a Parisian developer that wanted to create a game to rebel against the dull colour palettes that a glut of triple-A games seem to be obsessed with. Evoking memories of *Spyro the Dragon* and more recently *Journey*, *Izle* wants you to work with the Gods of Light to terraform the low-poly count island world, saving it from the darkness threatening it. It all has a non-stereotypical, (decidedly French) flavour.

IRONCLAD TACTICS

Format: **Android, PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Zachtronics Industries**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



THE DEVELOPER behind popular mobile release *Spacechem* has committed to releasing *Ironclad Tactics* on PS4 after launching the game on Android platforms last month. The game – which sees you command one side of America in a civil war – is easy to get into, but nigh impossible to master. It's a tactical card-based battler with a co-op campaign and is supported by micro-transactions.

TEKKEN 7

Format: **PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Bandai Namco**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



AFTER LOCATION testing an early build of the game in Japan, *Tekken 7* is taking its cues more from the PS3's free-to-play *Tekken Revolution* than numbered prequel *Tekken 6*. The game will remove the series' staple 'bound' feature, replacing the mechanic with two new systems: Rage Arts and Power Crushes. Rage Arts open your player up to Rage state and Power Crushes are attacks that can't be interrupted.



CANCELLED – Titan (PC)

Blizzard's next-gen MMO was unceremoniously cancelled last month, after a few years of development rumours. The decision apparently came from Blizzard wishing to maintain current projects, and avoid cannibalising its existing fanbase.



DELAYED – Skullgirls: Encore (Vita, PS3)

The cult hit's rerelease has been delayed (again…), leaving fighters that want a cat-girl with a detachable skull on their Vita in for a wait until at least Q1 of next year. It's a shame – *Skullgirls* is a perfect Vita brawler.

ESCAPE DEAD ISLAND

Format: **PS3, Xbox 360, PC**
Publisher: **Deep Silver**
Developer: **Fatshark**
ETA: **November 21**



FLEDGLING FRANCHISE *Dead Island* doesn't seem old enough to warrant a spin-off, but that didn't stop Swedish developer Fatshark from working on an adventure game revolving around a newcomer to the series – Cliff Calo. He travels to the archipelago that the first game's setting of Banoi was a part of to investigate what really happened there. The game is story-driven, with a cel-shaded art direction that makes great use of *Dead Island*'s famous gore.

HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Heart Machine**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2014**



HYPER LIGHT *Drifter* came from developer Alex Preston's desire to create a game combining the best bits of *A Link To The Past* with the highlights of *Diablo*. This attracted programmer Beau Blyth – who worked on *Samurai Gunn* – and *Fez* musician Disasterpeace, who, together, make up Heart Machine. The game concerns Preston's battles with his health, realised as a NES-inspired action RPG.

DEEP DOWN

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



IMAGINE TAKING the divisive portions of *Assassin's Creed* (read: the modern day segments) and wrapping them up in gameplay similar to *Dark Souls*. That's essentially what to expect from *Deep Down*, Capcom's curious free-to-download game, built on the impressive new Panta Rhei engine. The game's dungeon-crawling sections have you play in third-person, whilst the semi-futuristic New York sections revert to a first-person view.

DYING LIGHT

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **WarnerBros. Interactive Entertainment**
Developer: **Techland**
ETA: **30 January 2015**



THE DEVELOPER behind *Dead Island* and *Dead Island: Riptide* has taken its expertise to Warner Bros. to make a game more in-keeping with traditional zombie fiction. Like *Dead Island*, *Dying Light* will have four-player co-op multiplayer, though this facet is bolstered with an asymmetrical competitive component. The game will also follow a day/night cycle to reinforce the sense of doom…

PERSONA 4 ARENA ULTIMAX

Format: **PS3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **Arc System Works**
ETA: **21 November 2014**



THE BIGGEST change coming to the *Persona 4 Arena* sequel is how the projections of each fighter's ego works: before a Persona-dependent character (such as Yukiko) would have the same amount of hits to her Persona as any other, but now the balance is changed to ensure combatants whose abilities rest in the human character can be suppressed more easily. Characters also have access to their Shadow selves.

DRAGON QUEST HEROES

Format: **PS3, PS4**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **Omega Force**
ETA: **2015**



IT SEEMS that taking your franchise and reinvigorating it with a *Musou* game is in right now. *Hyrule Warriors* started the campaign, giving *Zelda* fans as much fan service as they could muste. *Dragon Quest* is the latest to get the *Musou* treatment, and from what we've seen so far, it actually suits this series better than it did *Zelda*. Between the Slimes, the Golems and the Cyclops armies, it's a match made in heaven.

WRECKFEST

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Bugbear Entertainment**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



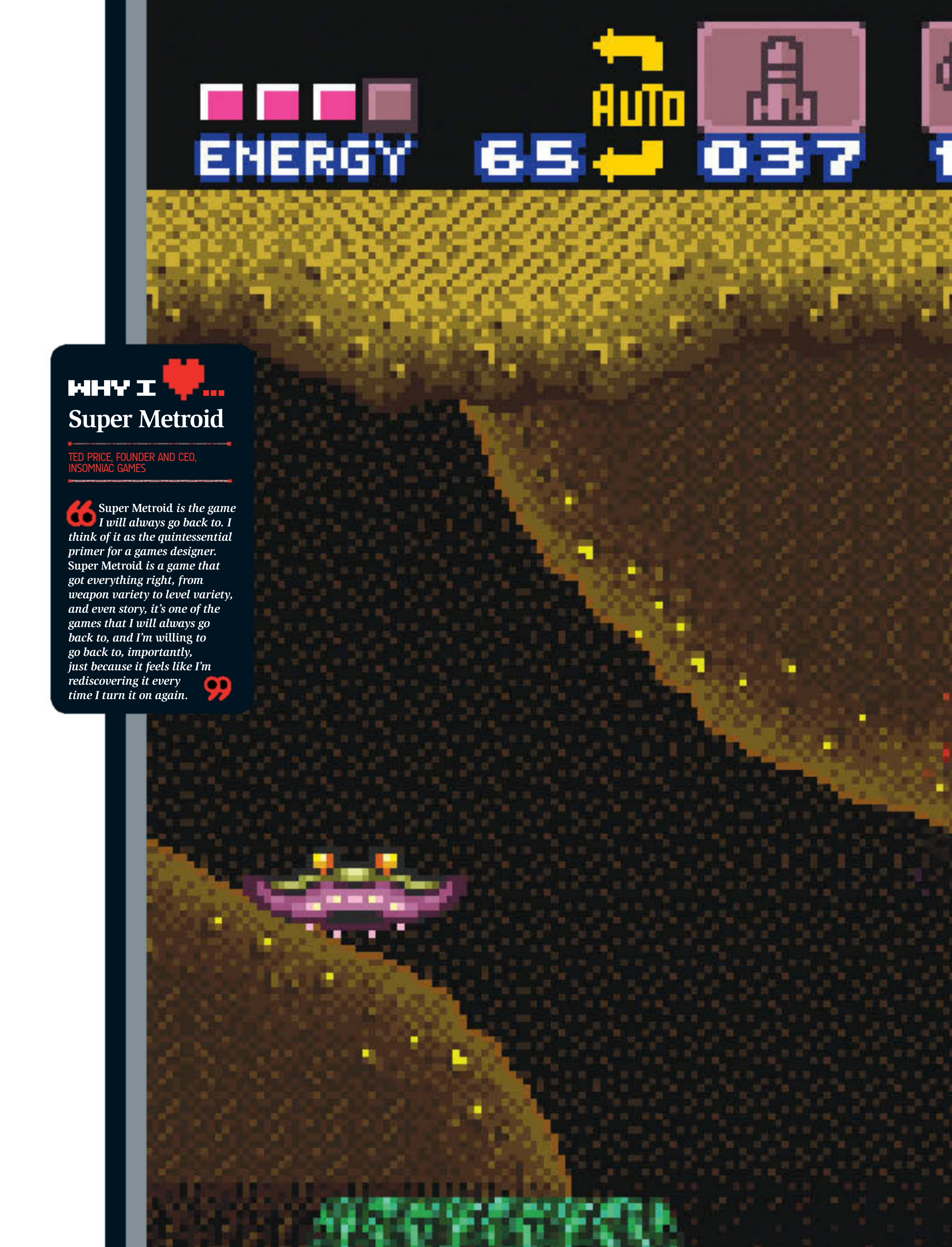
KNOWN ONLY as '*Next Car Game*' for the last year or so, Finnish developer Bugbear Entertainment has finally given its newest project a real name: *Wreckfest*. Considering the game is multiplayer-focused destruction derby-inspired affair that can support up to 18 simultaneous players, the name seems apt. The game comes from the creative force behind *Ridge Racer Unbounded* and *FlatOut*, so we're sure it's in good hands.

ZODIAC

Format: **Vita, iOS**
Publisher: **Kobojo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



THE SCENARIO writer of *Final Fantasy X-2* and *XII*, the composer from *Final Fantasy Tactics*, the *Tekken* series and *Valkyria Chronicles*, and the sound designer of the *Katamari* games are just a few names attached to a freshly announced JRPG called *Zodiac*. Publisher Kobojo insists the game will play like *Dragon's Crown* meets *Valkyria Profile*, with unannounced online elements.



WHY I ❤...

Super Metroid

TED PRICE, FOUNDER AND CEO, INSOMNIAC GAMES

"Super Metroid *is the game I will always go back to. I think of it as the quintessential primer for a games designer.* Super Metroid *is a game that got everything right, from weapon variety to level variety, and even story, it's one of the games that I will always go back to, and I'm willing to go back to, importantly, just because it feels like I'm rediscovering it every time I turn it on again.*"



"I think of Super Metroid as the quintessential primer for a games designer"

TED PRICE, FOUNDER AND CEO, INSOMNIAC GAMES



WILL MICROSOFT KILL MINECRAFT?



M*inecraft* has sold over 54 million copies, been downloaded over 100 million times and generated an untrackable amount of revenue in licensed goods and merchandise. It's almost impossible to put a price on… almost. Earlier this year, Microsoft and developer Mojang announced that the studio had been bought – its breakthrough game sold – for an incredible 2.5 billion dollars. Is it a recipe for disaster, or will it be another notch in Microsoft's bedpost? »

At the moment, the *Halo* skins are only available on Microsoft-related formats, but soon we imagine we'll see Microsoft promoting their exclusives *everywhere*.

Less than a month after entering beta, a little indie game called *Minecraft* surpassed one million sales. The game had never been backed by a publisher, it had never received any official funding, and it had entered into no formal advertising – the impressive sales were generated through word of mouth alone. Sales didn't even pass through Steam, but instead through an obscure indie website which required payment via Paypal. It was a success unheard of back in 2009, before the current 'indie vogue'. Four months later, the creator – Marcus Persson, or Notch – estimated his game had gained a net worth of $33 million. Just before the game's official launch in November 2011, *Minecraft* had already sold 4 million copies, attracting over 16 million registered users.

Fast-forward to 29 April 2014, and *Minecraft* is the best-selling PC game of all time, with upwards of 15 million sales – 54 million across all platforms. With this in mind, it's easier to see why publishing giant Microsoft decided to commit an incredible $2.5 billion (roughly £1.5 billion) to purchase the studio behind gaming's most notable success story. But how did *Minecraft* get to that level? How did one man's vision lead a team of developers to international acclaim, and one of the biggest studio buyouts in gaming history?

"The story behind *Minecraft* is unique, and not just in the gaming world," explains journalist and author, Linus Larsson



Lanus Larsson followed the rise of Mojang from its earliest days.

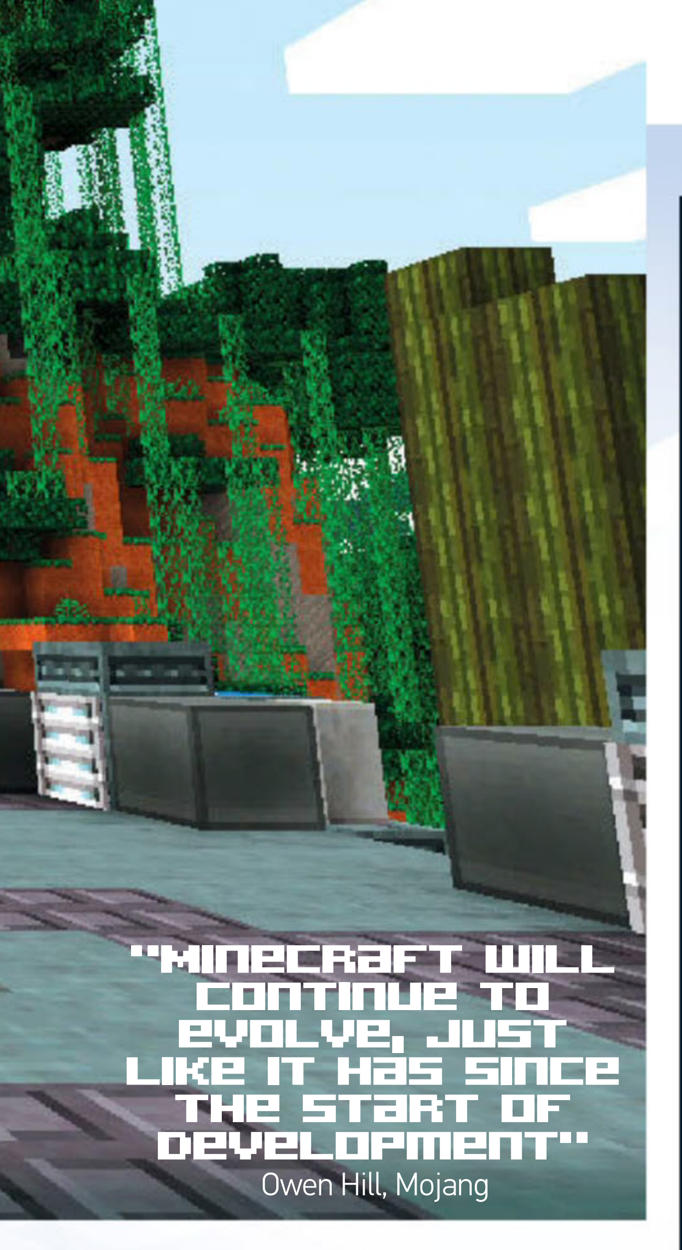


Phil Spencer has promised fans Microsoft won't ruin *Minecraft*.

– one of the writers that penned *Minecraft: The Unlikely Tale of Marcus "Notch" Persson And The Game That Changed Everything*. "When *Minecraft* took off a few years ago, it caught mine [and co-author Daniel Goldberg's] attention and we published interviews with Notch in the magazines and websites we were working with. Back then, the story was to a degree centred around Notch's sudden wealth, and to be honest the book we first imagined we would write had a lot to do with money and the business aspects of *Minecraft*. However, the more we understood about *Minecraft*, the community, Mojang and Notch himself, the more we realised we would have to write another book, a more personal account of Notch as a creator and the culture around *Minecraft*."

It was interesting to observe how suddenly Notch became an iconoclastic figure in the games industry – for an indie developer, he'd developed a huge cult of personality that rivalled even the likes of the triple-A juggernauts Peter Molyneux, Cliff Bleszinski and Ken Levine. "It was not until Notch left Midasplayer (now known as King) and started to make games in his spare time that he created *Minecraft*. That says a lot about how creativity works: the established games industry would not have endorsed the idea that became *Minecraft*, I'm afraid. But Notch left, did his own thing and the rest is history."

Even since the game's release in 2011, *Minecraft* has been a game in which the community has been a crux – the empire *Minecraft* has built relies directly on the close relationship the



"MINECRAFT WILL CONTINUE TO EVOLVE, JUST LIKE IT HAS SINCE THE START OF DEVELOPMENT"
Owen Hill, Mojang

developers have maintained with the community, an intense and dedicated group of fans that are largely responsible for the game's success. Even today, *Minecraft* engages in very little formal advertising, the Let's Players and YouTubers keeping the game's momentum strong, three years after its launch.

"I can't imagine the game being close to as successful as it is without the help of the community," explains Larsson. Because *Minecraft* was only ever distributed digitally when it was launched, it required players to engage with each other if they wanted to unlock the full potential of a game they were effectively beta testing – it was oblique: there was no over-arching objective, a design choice that flew in the face of conventional gaming. Engaging in dialogue with other players and creating an ad-hoc manual of sorts on the fly gave early players a sense of purpose deeper than 'just playing' the game.

"Let's Play and YouTubers in general helped *Minecraft* to be the success that it is today: the lack of a manual made players talk to and help each other out, which strengthened the community," Larsson continues, "the YouTube pheomenenon wasn't planned by Notch or Mojang – it they did not plan for this to become a major part of the *Minecraft* community. It just happened on its own." And yet, that's probably a core part of how *Minecraft* became the household name it is today – parents that would otherwise be ignorant to

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Microsoft's chequered history of gaming takeovers



THE GOOD: LIONHEAD

The British developer was taken over by Microsoft back in 2006, two years after Microsoft saw how successful *Fable* had been on the original Xbox. The takeover has worked well for Lionhead – who has retained its image as a developer with integrity, who will never rush a game to hit sales targets and windows. Lionhead continues to make triple-A, innovative projects on behalf of Microsoft.



THE BAD: RARE

Poor Rare. Once, the developer completely flew in the face of convention as a Western developer trusted to oversee Nintendo licences, taking the Nintendo aesthetic after that and creating its own IP beloved by many. Since the Microsoft buyout, though, the developer has become something of an underwhelming entity – the most recent release *Kinect Sports Rivals* reportedly costing the company a significant loss.

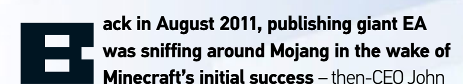


THE UGLY: ENSEMBLE

The *Age Of Empires* developer was acquired by Microsoft in 2001, operating as an internal studio to the publisher until it closed down in 2009 - after the disastrous sales of the ill-fated *Halo Wars*. The collaboration saw Ensemble work with licences for *Star Wars*, and begin to build a rumoured *Halo* MMO… but to no avail. The staff moved on to found Robot Entertainment and work closely with Zynga.

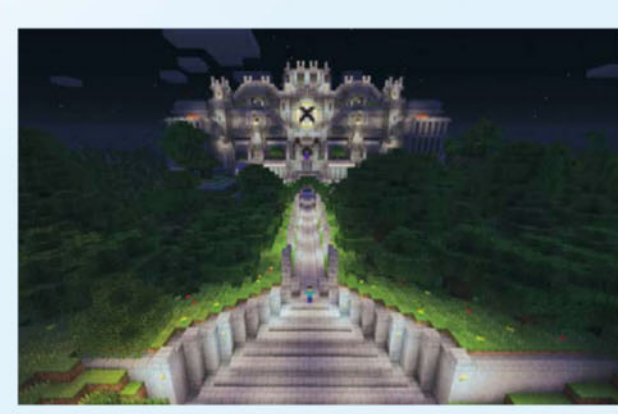
gaming culture are au fait with YouTubers like Stampy Longnose or iballisticsquid because their children watch their videos like regular TV shows. News channels – both here and abroad – run features on *Minecraft* and bring in-game creators in to talk about something they frequently have no personal point of reference for. Newspapers talk about the game separately from the rest of the gaming industry, because it stands out so much as a universal, involving experience.

So why did Notch decide to leave the project last month, selling both the *Minecraft* IP and Mojang to Microsoft for a staggering $2.5 billion? The answer could lie in the first 24 hours of *Minecraft*'s existence on the 360: released in 2012, *Minecraft* attracted over 400,00 players in its first day on Xbox Live, selling over 1 million copies in its first week – an unprecedented figure on the Xbox Live Arcade format. By the end of 2012, 12 million copies of *Minecraft* had been downloaded, with Microsoft making extra money through its DLC add-ons (even if they only ever offered cosmetic changes to the player character). "I'm not surprised at all that Microsoft wants to buy it," reveals Larsson. "The value of a game as successful, with a community as vibrant as *Minecraft*'s, is obvious. What did surprise me, though, was that the founders wanted to sell the company. They have turned down so many offers from investors, loudly talking about how they prefer to be independent that the news about the sale was a bit of a shock."



B ack in August 2011, publishing giant EA was sniffing around Mojang in the wake of Minecraft's initial success – then-CEO John Riccitello met with Notch to discuss the options open to Mojang, but Notch rejected the offer, stating that though he played EA's games, he felt the company's vision was too far away from his own – outlining how protective he was of the *Minecraft* intellectual property. Former Facebook president and Napster co-founder Sean Parker also attempted to move in on the *Minecraft* craze in 2012, flying Notch and the rest of the development team to London in attempts to seduce the studio, but – once again – Mojang held firm. The only indication Notch ever publicly made about his 'price' for *Minecraft* was in a semi-ironic tweet on 12 December 2012 in which he wrote 'Anyway, my price is two billion dollars. Give me two billion dollars, and I'll endorse your crap.' So what was it about Microsoft that finally convinced Notch into parting with his passion project – was it just the money, or was it something more fundamental than that?

"There are only a handful of potential buyers with the resources to grow *Minecraft* on a scale that it deserves," explains Mojang's Owen Hill on the studio's official blog. "We've worked closely with »



It's not exactly subtle, but we think it's an apt visual metaphor for Microsoft building its new *Minecraft* empire.

» Microsoft since 2012, and have been impressed by their continued dedication to our game and its development. We're confident that Minecraft will continue to grow in an awesome way." It's refreshing to hear Hill's confidence in the Microsoft takeover, though the buyout does raise concerns about long-term staff at the studio – Hill comments it's too early to confirm whether or not Microsoft will bring its own people in, but predicts "the majority (if not all) Mojangstas will continue to work at Mojang for the time being."

Regarding Notch's involvement in the takeover, Hill continues: "Notch is the creator of *Minecraft* and the majority shareholder at Mojang. He's decided that he doesn't want the responsibility of owning a company of such global significance," explains Hill on the studio's official blog. "Over the past few years he's made attempts to work on smaller projects, but the pressure of owning *Minecraft* became too much for him to handle. The only option was to sell Mojang. He'll continue to do cool stuff though. Don't worry about that."

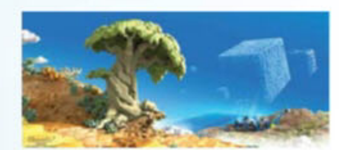
Notch's own statement on the matter is more revealing than Mojang's official stance – after the deal was finalised, Notch took to his blog to put the rumours circulating the buyout to rest, in one of the most self-effacing and remarkably sad notes from a developer we've ever seen. "I don't see myself as a real game developer," he begins, "I make games because it's fun, and because I love games and I love to program, but I don't make games with the intention of them becoming huge hits, and I don't try to change the world. *Minecraft* certainly became a huge hit, and people are telling me it's changed games. I never meant for it to do either. It's certainly flattering, and to gradually get thrust into some kind of public spotlight is interesting."

It's no secret that Notch has struggled with the public spotlight for some time – seeing himself more as a bedroom coder, rather than a professional businessman. "Early on the success was certainly a surprise to [Notch]," Larsson describes, when we ask him whether or not he thought Notch set out to make an international blockbuster. "When he started to charge for *Minecraft*, he was hoping to sell enough games to possibly make a decent living out of it. But even this was hoping for a lot. After a while though… Well, I think we can say he made a pretty decent living out of it!"

Back in 2013, Notch said in an interview with *The New Yorker* that he saw *Minecraft* as more of a 'freak thing' than any kind of orchestrated success, outlining his trepidation about ever trying to construct any kind of sequel to the game – saying "there's a conflict between the joy of being able to do whatever I want and the remarkable pressure of a watching world." This explains why now seemed like the right time for Notch to move on, selling off his own shares in Mojang to Microsoft (who also bought out controlling stakes from the other two Mojang founders, Carl Menneh and Jakob Porsér). "A relatively long time ago, I decided to step down from *Minecraft* development," explains Persson in his statement, post-deal, "I wanted to try to do new things. At first, I failed by trying to make something big again, but since I decided to just stick to small prototypes and interesting challenges. […] If I ever accidentally make something that seems to gain traction,

● *Minecraft* is an evergreen property – every time something new hits upon the cultural zeitgeist, Mojang and Microsoft can simply drop in new skins and themed blocks, and suddenly *Minecraft* is relevant all over again

MINECRAFT ALTERNATIVES



PLANETS³

Developer: Crucial Drift

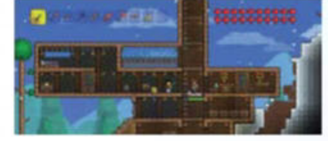
■ *Planets³* is a game that takes place in a world made entirely of 25cm³ blocks, which can be combined in any imaginable way to form 3D structures. It's a bit like *Minecraft*, but more voxel-based – finer details allow for greater freedom in the projects you can build.



INFINIFACTORY

Developer: Zachtronics

■ Another instalment in the *Infini* series (the series to inspire Minecraft's existence) Zachtronic's *Infinifactory* is more of a puzzler than its peers: requiring you to build factories that produce resources that need to be used to solve puzzles. Put your lateral thinking hats on.



TERRARIA

Developer: Re-Logic

■ Taking the labour fantasy and mineral gathering genre to 2D, *Terraria* focuses on pixels rather than blocks: set in a procedurally-generated world, the player is left to their own devices. With bosses, multiple crafting options and tiered resource management, it's just as addictive.



BLOCKLAND

Developer: Eric Hartman

■ *Minecraft* is often called the 'Lego' of gaming, but *Blockland* certainly has more of a Lego aesthetic – the faces, the animations and the figures all look a little like they should be paying a licence, but that can be forgiven when it comes down to the unique block physics and minigames.



"IF I EVER ACCIDENTALLY MAKE SOMETHING THAT SEEMS TO GAIN TRACTION, I'LL PROBABLY ABANDON IT IMMEDIATELY"

Marcus 'Notch' Persson, ex-Mojang, Minecraft creator

I'll probably abandon it immediately. […] Thank you for turning *Minecraft* into what it has become, but there are too many of you, and I can't be responsible for something this big. In one sense, it belongs to Microsoft now. In a much bigger sense, it's belonged to all of you for a long time, and that will never change. It's not about the money. It's about my sanity."

It's a bittersweet farewell to a project that Persson had been working on for well over five years, and his departure shook a lot of *Minecraft* fans – not just because they felt they had some kind of connection to Persson and Mojang, but because, traditionally, studios bought out by Microsoft don't have the best track record. Regular players were dubious that the game they know and love would change, that it would morph into something more corporate, less personal than the passion project Persson had in mind.

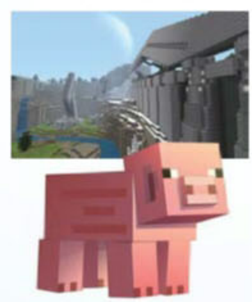
Thing is, as Persson mentions above, he hadn't actually been at the helm of *Minecraft* for over three years – that honour has belonged to Jens Bergensten since December 2011. "I think [Persson's] opinions have influenced the developers," explains Larsson, "but basically Jens has been calling the shots about what should happen. Having said that though, I think Microsoft will have to be careful not to destroy the image of Mojang and *Minecraft* now that Notch is leaving."

That's a concern echoed throughout *Minecraft*'s devout fanbase, though it's worth bearing in mind that the fanbase itself does contain a large amount of younger gamers. Though the mobile versions and console iterations of *Minecraft* have in-app purchases and DLC, the publishing model for the game has traditionally been customer-focused, maligning the current trend of picking apart gameplay elements and monetising them, in favour of allowing the players to be as creative as they want without a paywall blocking their path at every turn.



Marcus Persson, the mind behind *Minecraft*.





"So I've heard the news that Microsoft might buy *Minecraft*, one of my favourite games. Kids like me – and teens – love the game, so I have a message for you and everyone at Microsoft: please don't change it!" wrote Sabrina Lane (aged 10) on behalf of *Fortune* magazine, in a letter directed at Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella. "*Minecraft* is educational because you have to earn your stuff. If you want milk, you milk a cow. If you want diamonds, you start mining, and maybe you'll be lucky enough to find some. […] *Minecraft* is perfect the way it is: You can choose to build any way you want, making amazing creations, or you can build like you're in the real world, and do amazing things. Everyone I know, both boys and girls, […] loves *Minecraft* the way it is. So, Microsoft, you should know that we all want to keep *Minecraft* the same!"

Lane's words struck a chord in both the mainstream news and the tight-knit *Minecraft* community – the 10-year-old's succinct and simple overview of the franchise managed to summarise the fears of the fanbase at large. Further to that, Microsoft's Phil Spencer (head of Xbox division and Microsoft Studios) took it upon himself to reply to Lane, and though his message was labelled as a reply, it was clearly an open letter to *Minecraft* fans new and old meant to reassure uncertain players.

"Dear Sabrina, I saw your letter to Satya last week and since we announced today that Microsoft is buying *Minecraft*, I wanted to send you a reply," Spencer opens. "[…] I want you to know that we plan to keep all the things that people love about *Minecraft* the same. We will look for ways to make *Minecraft* better with more opportunities for players to play, connect and share together." Spencer makes it clear that Microsoft intends to stick to the central core of what made *Minecraft* so meteorically successful in the first place – after all, the publisher isn't stupid: Microsoft didn't shell out $2.5 *billion* just to drive the IP into the ground.

"One of the best things for me is that I see so many people making great things in *Minecraft*," Spencer explains in the letter, "I have this dream that a bunch of new game creators are learning and building their very first 'game' using *Minecraft*. It is really cool that you can create whatever you want – in the real world or using your imagination to make your own world." It's a salient point well made – *Minecraft* has been called the 'Lego of videogames' by various commentators, flying in the face of the typical image of killing, maiming and unnecessary violence that tarnishes the external view of our industry.

M*inecraft* projects litter gaming news on an almost daily basis – news aggregators tend to have at least one *Minecraft* story on the front page per day ('You Won't Believe What This Kid Built In Minecraft!' for example), and official and unofficial *Minecraft* forums are constantly flush with builders showing off new projects or requesting help from other players to complete their lofty visions. As these projects keep evolving, and the scale of what players want to achieve in *Minecraft* grows bigger and more complex, the developers are tasked with constantly updating the game: responding to 100 million players' demands and keeping everything in good shape.

"*Minecraft* will continue to evolve, just like it has since the start of development," writes Owen Hill on the Mojang blog, referencing the game's future now that Microsoft pulls the strings. "We don't know specific plans for *Minecraft*'s future yet, but we do know that everyone involved wants the community to grow and become even more amazing than it's ever been. Stopping players making cool stuff is not in anyone's interests." »

"THE STORY BEHIND MINECRAFT IS UNIQUE, AND NOT JUST IN THE GAMING WORLD"

Linus Larsson, author, Minecraft: The Unlikely Tale of Marcus "Notch" Persson and the Game That Changed Everything

» Microsoft's intentions remain slightly unclear – whether the publisher wants to wrangle the existing game's publishing model slightly so the title becomes more Xbox-focused or not is at the forefront of everyone's minds. Thing is, it wasn't actually Mojang that ported the original Xbox 360 version of the game, but rather 4J Studios (the same studio that has worked on all the other *Minecraft*-to-console ports, too). The subsequent release on the Xbox One saw the game improved – with bigger worlds, expanded multiplayer features and – importantly for *Minecraft* – built-in social features.

It goes without saying that all these features are available on the PlayStation formats too, so Microsoft's proposed acquisition of the title leads to a curious and previously unseen situation in the industry: a Microsoft-owned IP existing on Sony platforms. The fact the Vita version of *Minecraft* released only a few weeks ago is a silent but clear sign of Microsoft's intent – though Microsoft doesn't *quite* own the game just yet, it's not going to pull the title from other platforms any time soon, but rather use those sales to its advantage, perhaps intending to start the slow process of recouping the $2.5 billion investment (We're not sure how we'll feel seeing 'publisher: Microsoft' on our PlayStations, though…)

Perhaps Microsoft will even use *Minecraft* as a way to highlight their exclusive properties across multiple formats – ever think you'd see *Gears Of War* or *Fable* content on the Vita? Well, if Microsoft is intent on dropping content in on other formats as often as it does on the 360 and Xbox One, we can't imagine it'd be too long before that mentality leads to a little cheeky cross-promotion.

As far as Mojang itself goes, what could Microsoft's intentions be? The studio had two other games in the pipeline that have been in and out of development limbo as *Minecraft* became more and more important as an on-going project. The first is *Scrolls* – an ambitious idea conceived by Notch and another Mojang founder Jakob Porsér that aimed to fill a gap they thought was open in the market: a collectible card game, infused with elements of strategy and crafting. There's no word on whether Microsoft intends to pursue the game – but in light of Blizzard's *Hearthstone* and its runaway success, it seems likely Microsoft would try and muscle in on the market (although with the upcoming release of Jagex's *Chronicle: RuneScape* and the glut of other CCGs that have invaded the market since *Hearthstone*, we do wonder whether *Scrolls* is perhaps dead forever…)





Are we going to see more enemies now Microsoft is in charge? Perhaps we'll see some *Gears* locust, or an elite or two from *Halo*.



Creator Nick Polyarush (also known as Ancient) took his *Minecraft* city into PhotoShop to make it look more presentable.





But then, since over half of *Minecraft*'s lifetime sales are on mobile devices (handily collected under the blanket 'Minecraft: Pocket Edition' moniker), it would make sense for Microsoft to push the mobile and tablet version of the game *hard*, which could have two positive side-effects: firstly, if Microsoft offered exclusive content on the struggling Windows phone, it could help the hardware out against the Samsung and Apple dominance. Secondly, it could use in-game advertising and linking to directly up awareness of *Scrolls* (should it release) to the 20+ million mobile players the game has on an almost daily basis.

Minecraft's future may be under a little scrutiny, especially since Microsoft's track record of studio takeovers is patchy, to say the least. But with an army of fans ready to loudly and readily criticise the *slightest* problem, and an internal team eager to keep the fanbase on-side, we're actually quite optimistic about Microsoft's expensive new project.

Mojang may have been an independent studio that created the most notable new game in the last decade, but it was arguably limited by its experience and scope. Microsoft is a hardware and software giant – a company masterful in building empires – so we're excited to see what kind of mind-blowing projects it can construct out of the new tools it's suddenly found itself wandering around the versatile gaming landscape with.

BEST CREATIONS



Here's our favourite selection of projects you can find scattered around the servers that make up the *Minecraft* world…



MIDDLE-EARTH'S MINAS TIRITH



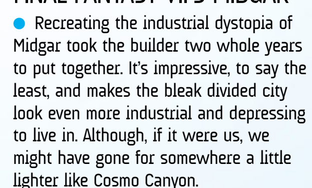
● The most ambitious fortress in Middle-earth (pipe down, Helm's Deep) looks resplendent in *Minecraft*'s lo-fi reimagining, showing that Tolkien wasn't completely insane when thinking up his buildings… if nothing else, *Minecraft* proves these places can (kind of) exist? Don't shatter our fantasies.

STAR WARS' DEATH STAR



● You think *Minecraft*, you think cubes and blockiness – not a looming sphere, hung suspended above planets, readying their doom. But here the orbital monstrosity has been created out of cubes alone, rendering a more terrifying iteration of Darth Vader's warship, simply because of how jaggedly impressive it looks.





FINAL FANTASY VII'S MIDGAR

● Recreating the industrial dystopia of Midgar took the builder two whole years to put together. It's impressive, to say the least, and makes the bleak divided city look even more industrial and depressing to live in. Although, if it were us, we might have gone for somewhere a little lighter like Cosmo Canyon.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE'S COLUMBIA

● 'Booker, catch!' says Elizabeth as she throws you a redstone block, which you then unceremoniously slam into place with the ball of your fist as if you were hitting an elevator switch… that's probably not how the full re-imagining of Columbia was made, but it entertains us to think it was.



THE GAME THAT INSPIRED MINECRAFT

We spoke to Zach Barth – the creator of *Infiniminer* – about the game that inspired *Minecraft*'s creation, and his feelings regarding Notch…



Can you explain the relationship between *Minecraft* and *Infiniminer*?

From my understanding, *Minecraft* started off as a *Infiniminer* clone… the first video Notch ever posted about *Minecraft* he said 'Hey look, I'm working on an *Infiniminer* clone'. You see things and think 'why is there a TNT block in *Minecraft*?' Well, it's because there was one in *Infiniminer*. As far as I know, *Infiniminer* was the first game to do the whole procedural block world thing, but the game *was* more of a competitive FPS than a grindy resource gatherer, so…

So how does it feel to see *Minecraft* where it is today?

Well, every game takes something from somewhere else. The example I always use is the health bar, right? Someone somewhere had that idea first, but everybody's copied it since. I don't know who that is, y'know, you think 'Fuck 'em'. [laughs]

That's a healthy attitude to have!

Thank you, but you sort of have to have it! It's an emotional minefield otherwise – the angle people often come at me with is 'Doesn't it make you feel like shit?' And my response is usually 'No, it's a bit more complex than that…' People just want clips of me saying 'Oh, I'm really mad' or 'God, I'm angry', but that's not the case.

What do you make of Microsoft buying *Minecraft* for $2.5 billion?

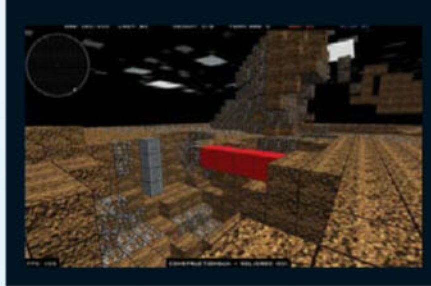
I used to work at Microsoft Games Studio, and a senior designer knew I worked on *Infiniminer*, so when *Minecraft* was first being released on Xbox Live I was pulled into a meeting with all these executives and they were all like 'Who the fuck is that?' and I had nothing to contribute and it was really embarrassing, and they never brought me back! But I'm surprised Microsoft bought it, because I'm not sure they really knew what to do with it when they first started working with Mojang, but then I guess it must have gone well for them!

If you could give one piece of advice to an independent developer in the industry now, what would it be?

Find a good idea and copy it! But seriously, just make games. The barrier to entry is lower than it's ever been. Go out there, make them, learn from your mistakes.

And if you could describe Notch in one word, what would it be?

Mysterious… like a phantom… [laughs]





Building An Empire

TT GAMES REVEALS TO GAMES™ THE SECRETS OF THE STUDIO'S SUCCESS

The licensed game became somewhat of a dirty phrase in the games industry during the early 2000s – it was indicative of rushed, cheaply developed and cynical releases. But Traveller's Tales and TT Games managed to turn that around, almost single-handedly, proving there's still room for licensed titles in today's packed industry. We sat down with Traveller's Tales executive producer Phil Ring and design director Arthur Parsons to talk about how Traveller's Tales has found so much success in an area that has outright killed other developers…



STAYING ALIVE as a British developer isn't easy. Building an empire on licences isn't easy. Retaining independent status in an age where publishers tend to rule the roost isn't easy. Yet, in spite of all of this, Traveller's Tales (and its parent TT Games) thrives.

In 1990, Traveller's Tales scored its first deal; working with Psygnosis, a leading 3D effects company, the studio released *Leander* and *Puggsy*. Though the second game was something of a commercial flop (its vision swamped by the myriad Sega Mega Drive titles populating the industry at the time), publisher Psygnosis was impressed enough with the four-strong team to offer them their first licence – Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

That was the beginning of Traveller's Tales licensed journey – *Dracula* sold well, enough to attract the attention of a small start-up company operating out of Santa Monica – Sony Imaginesoft. Sony had recently pitched the idea for a Mickey Mouse game to Disney – who signed the idea off in a flash – and were looking for a developer. Traveller's Tales had been on the radar for a while at this point, and – as it turns out – *Mickey Mania* was *exactly* the kind of game the studio needed to prove it could handle just about any licence going.

From then, Traveller's Tales began its dominance of the licenced game, working on myriad properties for a slew of successful publishers, including *Sonic* games for Sega, *Crash Bandicoot* title for Universal Games, Disney titles for Activision and a *Muppets* game for Midway. After two decades of successful releases (unfortunately peppered by a few commercial unsatisfying original projects), Traveller's Tales was given the opportunity to work on a Lego *Star Wars* game, pitched by LucasArts… a series which is now in the top 10 highest selling games of all time, with an excess of 100 million sales under its belt.

"At the time, we really weren't expecting *Star Wars* to be a success," explains studio veteran and design director, Arthur Parsons. "I've been here since 1997, and when I joined, we had a long history of being a developer that worked on licensed properties: *Crash Bandicoot*, *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, *Sonic The Hedgehog* – we'd been there and done it on all sorts of brands. We didn't know *Star Wars* would be anywhere as near as big and successful as it has become. It all comes down to the core principles of a top development team, and the philosophy we have with making a fun, authentic, two-player kids game. You look around, and there aren't many titles – still, to this day – that do what Lego games do."

TRAVELLER'S TALES HAD wanted to work on a Lego game for a while before they had the chance to do it with *Star Wars*, yet as soon as the deal was being signed off, the rights to Lego games were sold to Giant Interactive… so Traveller's Tales began talks to acquire Giant, and in »

2004 merged with the company to form the publishing arm of Traveller's Tales – TT Games. It's been a smooth ride for the studio since then – gaining the trust of licence holders around the world, and restoring gamer's trust in the licenced game.

"When we get to make a *Lego* videogame, we get to do things with the IP and characters that other properties and other developers just can't do," explains Phil Ring – executive producer for Traveller's Tales – when we quiz him about the process behind courting licence holders whose properties the studio wants to play with.

"From my perspective, as a game director, the authenticity in any game we make is absolutely key," reveals design director Arthur Parsons, when we ask him how Traveller's Tales has managed to retain its good name in the licenced games market for so long. "No matter what the IP we're working with is, we'll effectively become fanboys in it, even if we weren't before. Obviously for most of the stuff we work on, especially *Batman*, we're fanboys anyway, but we do so much research it's unbelievable. If a franchise has films, TV, comics, books… we'll read it, we'll watch it, you name it. And so that then allows us to translate everything into the game."

"When we get to make a *Lego* videogame, we get to do things with the IP and characters that other properties and other developers just can't do," adds Phil Ring – executive producer for the studio. "We dig into and play around with the entire property that's available to us. For example, with *Lego Batman 3*, we're not limited to New 52 content – we're allowed to do stuff with New 52, yeah, but we're also allowed to go into the classic stuff, we get to mix and match whatever we like. So the design team are just throwing ideas around all the time, and because we're making a *Lego* game, DC and Lego both turn around and go 'Yeah, go ahead!'"



Arthur Parsons – dressed for the occasion – oversees work on Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham.

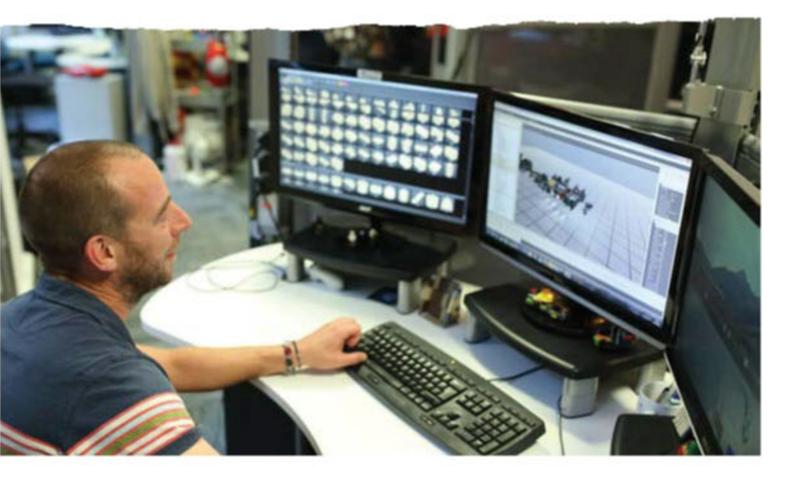


"IP holders allow us to do that," adds Parsons, "they trust us now. They trust us with their brands. We've shown, as both a development house and publisher, that we can effectively deliver an incredibly authentic experience in any given world, whether that's *Lord Of The Rings*, *Harry Potter* or anything else. We can deliver these experiences in a quirky, whimsical, different way – that's always massively good value for money. Publishers and IP holders love that about our videogames!"

After working on so many different games, each with their own mechanics and stylistic quirks, it's amazing the *Lego* games always manage to inspire loyalty in consumers, and sell (and typically sell more and more with every release). In an industry where a vocal consumer base is quick to criticise stagnating IPs and repetitive mechanics, *Lego* games somehow manage to weather the storm, universally loved by parents and children alike.

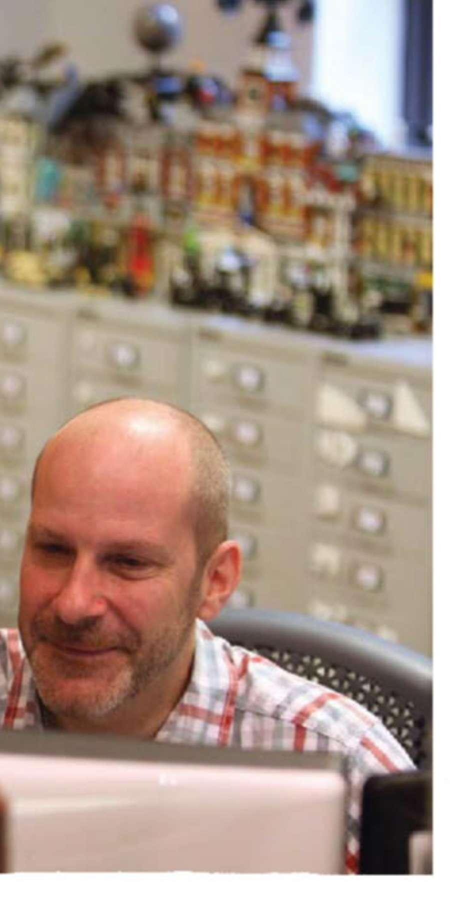
> "FOR US, IT'S JUST AS CHALLENGING BEING SUCCESSFUL AS IT WOULD BE IF WE WEREN'T"
> ARTHUR PARSONS, DESIGN DIRECTOR, TRAVELLER'S TALES

The Lego *games are a lot more hardware-hungry than people tend to think.*

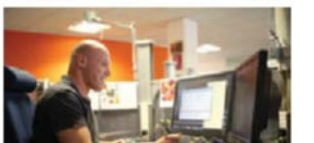


"BEARING IN MIND the number of *Lego* titles we've produced over the years," reveals Parsons, "it's a lot easier for us to pitch gameplay ideas now because we've got a lot of very clear reference points. But – it has to be said – we never, *ever* sit on our hands or rest on our laurels: every game we make, we're not trying to reinvent the wheel, but instead we're trying to put something new and shiny and sparkly *on* the wheel so that the new features, the new content, the new modes all generate excitement in our players."

It's a salient point, and one that obviously works – not only has the franchise in itself got more than 20 games under its belt, but each IP



within that has sequels and spin-offs as well. "If people are coming back to our games, we never want them to feel like they've 'been there' and 'done that' before," continues Parsons. "We want to try and make it as new as an experience as possible every time. Even with *Lego Batman 3*, it will feel grounded and familiar, initially, as a *Lego Batman* game, but we turn it right up with new mechanics and game styles and ways to explore













the DC universe. For us, it's just as challenging being successful as it would be if we weren't."

BUT THE STRENGTH of the company isn't just founded on licenced games – Traveller's Tales are one of the few successful, triple-A, studios that are dedicated to making games accessible to children and adults alike. The Lego licence may allow TT Games to operate in a slew of instantly recognisable and ultimately lucrative franchises, but it also carries a responsibility to the most impressionable gaming audience of all: first-time gamers.

"One of the most important things for us is to make everything *fun*," Parsons admits. "A lot of the things we work with are inherently fun, and everything we create is with fun in mind. *Lego Batman 3* is, I think, my 14th *Lego* game, but it's still going to be some kid somewhere's first ever game. It has to be accessible, but it also has to be fun and exciting, because you need that kid to be interested and excited to see what's coming next." The challenge of creating games for younger gamers proves useful when considering the older audience, too; for gamers that have grown up on a steady diet of action games, *Lego* titles hit upon an agreeable pace – and according to Parsons, that's the intention...

"Young kids have short attention spans, and that fun and accessibility »

Around the Block

The Lego games have been around for a while, and have taken on a lot of modern pop-culture's biggest icons. Traveller's Tales still gets inundated with letters requesting it should work on various IP, though, and not all of them are entirely appropriate...

"We still get some wackier requests from the older fans," says Phil Ring. "People asking for Eighties TV programs or films – *Back To The Future* and things like that. So you get hardcore fans asking for these obscure games that – to all intents and purposes – are made for kids that'll pretty much be playing games for the first time.

"We work closely with Lego, so everything is age appropriate, everything has to be made perfectly in respect to Lego's age ranges, the youngest to the oldest. We get huge requests and we've been privileged enough to work on some of the biggest IPs in the world: Marvel, DC, *The Hobbit*... it's like the letters we get from people turns into our production schedule!"



Adam West brings yet another layer of authenticity to Traveller's Tales newest DC licensed game.





Above: Batcow... TT Games doesn't take itself too seriously.



Scenes We'd Like to See

THE LEGO LICENCE reminds us of a talent scout – the kind that was popularised by Nineties drama: it floats around, looking at all the most successful acts in the world, occasionally stepping forward to say 'Hey, we want you'. It's always a momentous announcement – the Internet erupts in fabulous joy, bloggers overheat from excitement, and everyone's inner child gets that little bit more fulfilled. In any case, there are still a few franchises yet to receive Lego reimaginings, and existing Lego figures in need of their own full game...

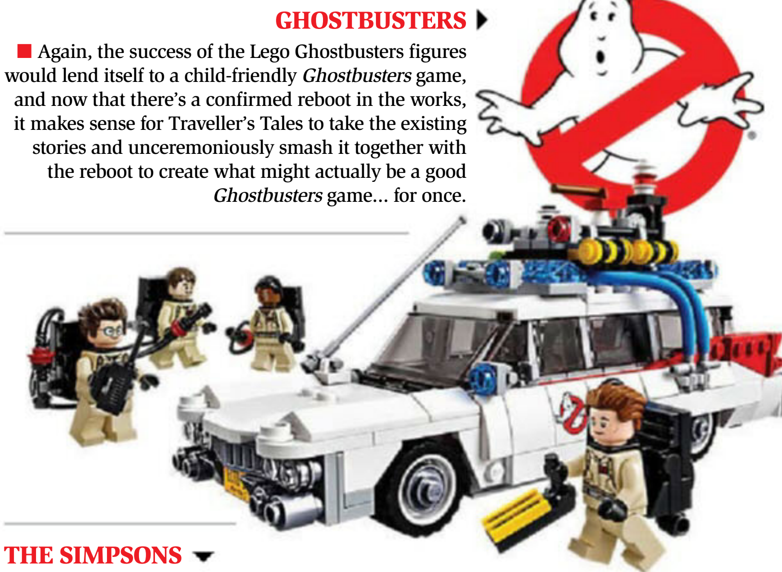


ADVENTURE TIME

The show that has come to summarise what it is to be a child this generation, *Adventure Time* has an eclectic cast of weird and wonderful creations that would make perfect Lego avatars, and its acceptance of madness is perfect fodder for self-aware level designers and a little meta storytelling.

GHOSTBUSTERS

Again, the success of the Lego Ghostbusters figures would lend itself to a child-friendly *Ghostbusters* game, and now that there's a confirmed reboot in the works, it makes sense for Traveller's Tales to take the existing stories and unceremoniously smash it together with the reboot to create what might actually be a good *Ghostbusters* game... for once.



LEGO STAR TREK

We're surprised we haven't seen any official *Star Trek* Lego yet (there is a block-based Trek set out there, manufactured by Kreo, which might be why...). But think; with the old and new film series, the Shatner years, the Stewart years and the entire premise around 'The Trouble with Tribbles' episode, the possibilities available in a Lego Star Trek game are limitless.



THE SIMPSONS

After the unveiling of *The Simpsons*' ensemble cast as Lego figurines last year, there has been an unquenchable hunger for more characters, settings and playsets dedicated to the veteran franchise. With as many characters as the Simpsons boasts (and some possible Family Guy/Futurama crossovers), it seems like the perfect excuse for Traveller's Tales to work on its adult- and child-friendly game design.



LEGO HBO

This is slightly more of a fantasy than any serious suggestion – it's not very family-friendly – but we just want to see Lego incarnations of *Game Of Thrones* characters take on the cast of the *Sopranos*. Or, better yet, the entire cast of *True Blood* take on Lego-ised Woody Harrelson and Matthew McConaughey. Think of all the blood, Lego nudity and unpleasant language you could get away with. And Lego Daenerys dragons!



» we have to include therefore makes our games more fun to adults and serious gamers: they don't get bogged down in the nitty-gritty of some overly serious videogame, they can just sit back, have fun, have a laugh and a joke, and – if they're a parent – can even do that with their child." It could be argued that developing child-friendly games could inhibit the options for your game at a design level – even with Lego as your base platform, you'd think designing with kids in mind would automatically mean having a smaller, more manageable structure to your game. Parsons disagrees.

"If you gave a kid 100 Lego bricks, is there a limit to what they could create?" he asks. "Not really – well, there probably is, but they'd never get there [laughter]. The *Lego* games are very much like that: the only limitation, as far as creativity goes, is in the IP or the brand. I don't think we'll ever go stale: as designers, we try to make sure every new game has something new in it, and as long as me and my team continue to come up with crazy ideas and concepts, we'll never get to the point where we reach a development ceiling. There's *so* much we can do, and I only think that's going to get more apparent as technology advances."

ON THE SUBJECT of technology, it's worth noting that Traveller's Tales' games take an incredible amount of power to run. The games first got their feet in the PS2 era, and have since spread to just about every format going (including handhelds and mobile), but the studio still dedicates itself to milking every ounce of power that it can from whatever hardware it's working on.

"Lego videogames have so much going on under the bonnet compared to other games, it's so impressive," Phil Ring describes. "We've got vehicles that use full physics models, we've got pedestrians walking around with different AI here and there doing bits and pieces in the background. Then there are all the levels of effects, post-effects, rendering techniques, lighting techniques, full real-time physics acting on all the Lego that is there, with animations playing meanwhile… the complexity in a *Lego* game isn't often seen because it's 'cutesy' – visually whimsical and cute.



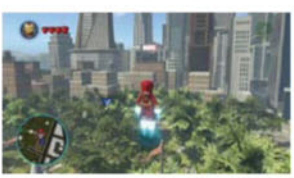
Just because the game is called Lego Batman 3*, that doesn't mean you're only going to be playing as Batman…*

"If you gave a kid 100 Lego bricks, is there a limit to what they could create? The Lego games are very much like that"

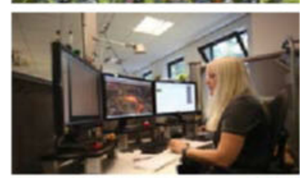
Arthur Parsons, design director, Traveller's Tales

"But we really did push the boundaries of what could be done [last-gen], so [this gen] is just going to let us do more of that, really." It helps that Traveller's Tales uses its own in-house engine to power its games – an engine that shapeshifts and takes on different forms depending on the platform it's being applied to – every iteration of the game revealing new shortcuts and capabilities of a team that has been working with the engine since its creation.

"We're fortunate enough to use our own tech here, which constantly gets reworked and optimised and re-engineered," explains Ring. "It sounds wrong to say, but the possibilities [in our games] really are pretty endless – we've only just got the new generation of hardware, and the three games we've released so far are fabulous. With *Lego Batman 3*, we're already finding gains [in what we can achieve] left, right and centre. The more Lego we can get into the game, the more fun it'll be. There are a lot of games out there where you can't really interact with much in the environments or in the levels – *Lego* games have these open worlds where anything Lego is interactive."











Lego Batman 3 – releasing later this month – is Traveller's Tales' fourth current-gen title, and already stands out from *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*, which released as a launch title for the PS4. The journey Traveller's Tales has undertaken since its humble origins working on a licenced *Dracula* game back in the day is not dissimilar to a super hero story in and of itself – one day, the studio stumbled upon a magic Lego block and it seemingly imbued the studio with the uncanny power to be successful. It's been a wild ride for the studio, but one that looks unlikely to grind to a halt anytime soon – especially as studio director Arthur Parsons remains as humble and down-to-earth as he was when we had the pleasure of asking him what the core formula for Traveller's Tales success was:

"If you do the prep work and treat the IP as if it was your own, the end result is going to be effectively a *Lego* game," he says. "And when we read in reviews that our games are the most authentic *Lord Of The Rings*, *Harry Potter*, Marvel, DC or whatever IP experience you can get – it just makes us glow with pride."

MARXISM MEETS MINECRAFT



INSIDE THE TOMORROW CHILDREN:

It's easy to see how the rise of the indie developer has happened. The longer-than-anticipated lifespan of the previous generation had grown a little too long in the tooth, all while conveyor belt game development rolled onwards forever, churning out one identikit shooter after another. Some may have lapped up each new *Call Of Duty* or *Assassin's Creed*, but to many these multimillion-selling franchises encapsulated a sense of lethargy within console development. Gamers want new ideas – that's a core truth of the industry – and so PC gaming began to rise in prominence once more, forcing the likes of Sony and Microsoft to realise they needed to seriously take a look at the interesting things happening on the PC indie space. Japan-based developer Q-Games, however, has walked this path for some time, starting with its well-loved *PixelJunk* series across the lifespan of the PS3 and culminating – as have so many – on PC and through Steam with *Nom Nom Galaxy*. With the rise of indie games comes a whole new era of interesting, original ideas and – in the case of *The Tomorrow Children* – games that are particularly difficult to describe.

"It's a brand new genre, so until it settles it will be difficult for people to describe," says Q-Games founder Dylan Cuthbert. "Perhaps it can be described as a social action 3D platformer? Of course that doesn't do it justice as it has hints of tower defence, *Minecraft* and *Animal Crossing*, too. I think the easiest way to describe it is as a 'parody Marxism simulator'." Of course, that doesn't really help all that much either, but it at least manages to set the tone for what we might be able to expect from



Q-GAMES' SOVIET-INFLUENCED WORLD-BUILDER

Q-Games' latest. The *Minecraft* influence is probably the easiest to tackle here; much like Mojang's smash-hit, *The Tomorrow Children* will revolve quite heavily on resource collection. You play a clone of one of the last remaining people in the world; it's your duty to head out into the blank, vacant space coined simply "the void", defeat beasts known as the Izverg (literally Russian for monster or fiend), collect materials and ultimately build improvements to your local town alongside the assistance of others. And that's the real selling point of the game: your town is only one of many, with multiple towns all running parallel to one another as part of a persistent world. It's possible, if you so wish, to grab a train at the station to another town and interact with its inhabitants there. It's a freedom that feels natural, but one that is built on a core drive for teamwork. Explaining the design process of how this interesting blend of games came together, Cuthbert says: "We didn't think 'Oh, we like X so let's put bits of that in. And, we like Y too, so let's put that in as well.' Instead, the gameplay all developed naturally to the new hybrid kind of gameplay it uses. It's only after the fact when describing it to people that it's easier to use prior games as examples to describe small parts of *The Tomorrow Children*. If you look at it as a whole though it is none of those games and is entirely its own 'thing'."

But the multiplayer experience is even trickier to explain; at once asynchronous and synchronous, the game allows you to witness the ghostly apparitions of other players as they explore, collect and craft – not unlike the way *Demon's Souls* periodically spawns the spectral renditions of other players in the very same area, a sort of glimpse into a parallel universe. Despite that, the actions of another player will affect the games of everyone in it. Dig a hole in the world and that hole will be dug for all players; a feature that Q-Games hopes will breed a sense of community and collaboration. "Actually, it's a sandbox and you can decide for yourself whether to take part in teamwork or just do your own thing," claims Cuthbert. "Of course the system and 'laws' of the world encourage teamwork, but you can be subversive too if that gives you kicks – just watch out for retribution!" That retribution he speaks of refers to the in-game police, an NPC force that will hand out tools to players for particular roles – ensuring the roles they need more of is suitably »

THE INDIE SCENE

The rise of the indie developer has enabled a large range of gaming experiences that – as of even five years ago – we may never have experienced on games consoles. Though indie games are increasing in popularity thanks to their varied themes and gameplay styles, there's still a stigma attached to smaller digital games as somehow being impossible to combat the 'proper' retail games. "I think exploring ideas and concepts freely only increases the appeal of games," says Dylan Cuthbert of the supposed lower appeal of indie games. "It adds all the bells and whistles and gives gamers things that are fresh and different. Not everyone has to like every single game, so more choice lets people like the games that they personally gravitate to and gives them more individual freedom to enjoy games for what they are."





Little is known of the Administrators. They are the last remaining humans and have learned technology that keeps them alive for a very long time, but also leaves them looking as crooked as they do.

fulfilled – as well as capturing and confining any would-be ne'er do wells. Choose to act as a detractor and players could repeatedly vote you down, turning your aura much darker and – eventually – summoning the wrath of the police force. "Teamwork and collaborative play is always something we've encouraged in our games," adds Cuthbert, "going back to *PixelJunk Monsters* with its awesome two-player mode. I'm not sure what draws me to it but I definitely like to put it in my games if I can. *The Tomorrow Children* has given us the biggest chance possible to explore these ideas."

With regards to its persistent world Cuthbert claims it's "closer to *Destiny*'s shared world", adding that you are the resident of a single town, with each location acting as home to 50-100 players. Your town's prosperity relies on every available workhand, of course, even if you can bribe the Administrators to allow you to move. "Everything in a particular town is shared among the residents," says Cuthbert, "and of course you are all digging in the same islands too. The multiplayer experience feels like a more substantial form of the ghostly apparitions you see in *Dark Souls*. *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* paved the way for this kind of asynchronous real-time action game and there are some very clever ideas in those games as a result of that."

These visions of other players only adds to the desolate tone *The Tomorrow Children* manages to impart. Barren landscapes aren't quite so uncommon in videogames but it's rare to see it represented with such style as *The Tomorrow Children*, however. The void is more than just a gameplay element, it's a very particular look for the game, too. "Our aesthetic is late Sixties/early Seventies European (think of Kubrick's *2001*). The look isn't so much "barren" as it is minimalistic and avant-garde by design. However, on top of this, if we filled out the world with what *we* want, that wouldn't leave the player any choice to fill it out how they want. Ultimately, the world is a sandbox." It's key to the game that its community of players affects the way it is shaped, claims Cuthbert, and that ties into the developer's hopes for the game; Q-Games is planning on supporting it long after its release in 2015, and will be driven not only by the features that are requested but by the *ways* people are playing, too. None of this really helps to explain quite how *The Tomorrow Children* fulfils its moniker of 'Marxism simulator', however.

"Very early on we wanted to bring in a Czech Republic feel to the game," says Cuthbert of the unique, Soviet art style, "they have a rich history of puppetry and stop-motion animation and I am a big Svankmejer fan. Svankmejer's look is a little more extreme so we didn't really want to go as far as that. But we wanted to bring a look that is cute and accessible, yet a bit creepy and "alien" at the same time. We sent our artists to Prague to study in traditional doll-making and to see a few of the plays, and that helped enormously. Eventually all that tied in and helped us create the Soviet/East European feel of the world, which then also drove the gameplay and ideas. I always find the best games emerge from layered processes like this."

Once the aesthetic was established, the drive to create gameplay mechanics that fit the tone quickly fell in place. NPCs of your town can supply missions and by adopting your role and working towards the greater good you'll earn yourself ration coupons as payment. With this, you'll be able to purchase a number of goods, but it'll also be used for travelling to different locations and, even more tantalising, purchases through the black market. Here the social economy of Marxism really shines through, as you'll gain access to items otherwise not available as well as missions that work against the state. But then there's no ignoring the Izverg threat, either; let them run rampant and the beasts – especially the tougher, boss-like ones – could destroy your town. It's at these points that you'll need

Other players will appear with a faint red glow – as seen here – which becomes darker or lighter depending on how they're voted by their peers. Misbehave and your reputation/aura will darken.

SUM OF ITS PARTS

The Tomorrow Children is taking inspiration from several diverse and fascinating sources

KARL MARX AND FREDERICH ENGELS
Avoiding pretension, the ideals of Marxism play a large role in the PS4 exclusive, and acting as clever groundwork for the gameplay.

ANIMAL CROSSING
Seeing your town gradually improve through continued labour is familiar, despite the more sinister qualities of *The Tomorrow Children*.

SVANKMEJER'S PUPPETRY
The Soviet themes and gameplay mechanics came from a love of Sixties Czech wooden puppetry, which drove the art direction for the game.

MINECRAFT
A large part of it is heading out into the dangerous wilds to collect resources so you and your townsfolk can construct improvements.

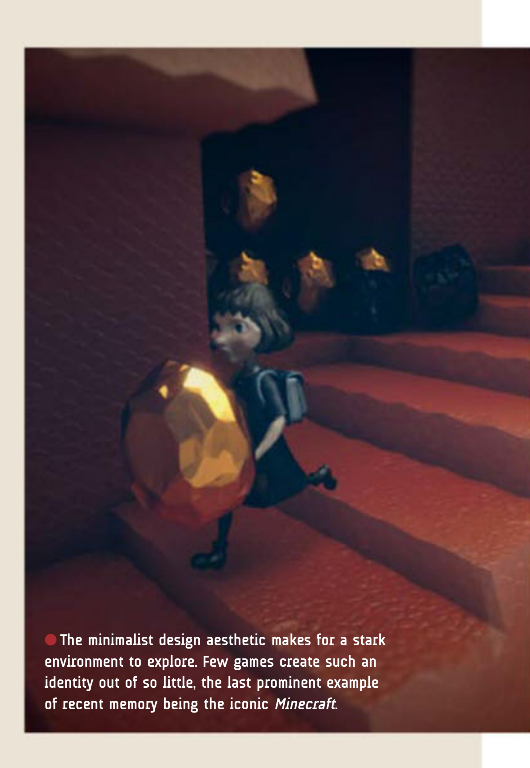
DEMON'S SOULS
The asynchronous multiplayer of visible but untouchable players in a parallel version of the game – has a lot of similarities to From Software's series.

PIXELJUNK MONSTERS
The Tomorrow Children has elements of Q-Games' own tower defence game in regards to protecting your town from beasts.

truly group together with the local players, because without the help you could end without a home to return to. It's these social elements that Q-Games wanted to pin down and fine-tune early on, and built up from that. It is a game built upon the idea of social economics, and somehow manages to make that compelling.

In many ways it's one of the first examples of a truly next-gen idea; not only in its drive for better, more impressive visuals but for previously unconsidered concepts. *The Tomorrow Children* is being created in tandem with Sony's Japan Studio and will release exclusively for PS4; but what drew Q-Games into working on Sony's latest console? "The sheer power under the hood," states Cuthbert very matter-of-factly. "Of course there are more powerful (and more expensive) video cards for the PC, but squeezing the power is much harder. And that's why you are seeing new graphics advances in console games and not so much on the PC. This has always been the case historically." Q-Games has long had a relationship with Sony, so to have *The Tomorrow Children* release exclusively on PS4 isn't a surprise to anyone, but Cuthbert has a lot of praise for how "hands-off" Sony has been with the game. "From the beginning Sony's encouraged us to use our collective imaginations and harness the power of the PS4 to bring *The Tomorrow Children* to life. Since it's a new platform and we're working with fairly complex lighting technology, that freedom gave us time to fully explore what we could do to make the game something special."

Cuthbert teases that there are a good number of features and elements of *The Tomorrow Children* yet to unveil, but the foundations that are here are strong enough to already give a sense that Q-Games could well be working on its most important title yet. Unveiled at gamescom this year, it was certainly one of Sony's hottest announcements – and hopefully the trend will only continue. But with it so reliant on a collaborative effort, should Cuthbert be worried that *The Tomorrow Children* is a little too niche to appeal to the audience it needs? "Going by the response so far I have no worries whatsoever," he says. "I think gamers were waiting for something different from the same 'year after year' franchise sequels. However, I don't worry about that anyway – I would prefer to have a niche product that people really love (like *PixelJunk Monsters* or *Eden*) than create something that doesn't have a 'niche' feeling. Of course the best situation is to create something that feels niche but is actually generally popular too, and I think *The Tomorrow Children* could hit that spot."



The minimalist design aesthetic makes for a stark environment to explore. Few games create such an identity out of so little, the last prominent example of recent memory being the iconic *Minecraft*.



CREATING A NARRATIVE FROM CHAOS

FAR CRY 4

THE PLOTS AND CHARACTERS OF OPEN-WORLD GAMES RECEIVE MORE SCORN THAN PRAISE, THE VAST OPTIONS PROVIDED OFTEN REMOVING ALL SENSE OF AUTHORSHIP. WE SIT DOWN WITH FAR CRY 4'S LEAD WRITER TO DISCUSS HOW HE'S TRYING TO REVERSE THAT TREND

For the most part, narrative-driven games feature a protagonist that is 'loud' or 'silent'. The former plays their part in the same way as a film actor, interacting with and influencing characters and events around them through words and actions that are either wholly pre-determined or guided by the player. Here, the player is experiencing everything through the filter of an authored entity. Silent protagonists are different, refraining from words altogether in an attempt to



minimise the level of authorship as much as possible. The idea is to present a space in which the protagonist is you, that makes the player feel as though the game world is coming straight into their own eyes.

This is an approach that has worked to differing levels of success, with the *Half-Life* series' Gordon Freeman being the most obvious and renowned poster boy for the silent protagonist movement. For every Freeman, though, there's a Jak of *Jak And Daxter,* the kind of character so lacking in any sort of intrigue that it overtly undermines your experience and acts to destroy any semblance of connection you might have with the world. Avoiding such pitfalls is one of the key skills for a writer when designing their silent hero.

Despite the risks, *Far Cry 4* is taking its leading man, Ajay Ghale down the silent route. The goal, according to lead writer Lucien Soulban, is simple enough: "We focused strongly on character in *Far Cry 3,* but this time we wanted something more player-driven than character-driven." In a game with as much variety and opportunity for interaction as *Far Cry 4*, the move towards a silent protagonist represents the desire of Soulban and his team to ask questions of the player. This is a game about war, dictatorship, ideological struggle and cultural vitality and, by having Ajay not say a word, the hope is that players feel a greater responsibility whenever they manipulate these themes.

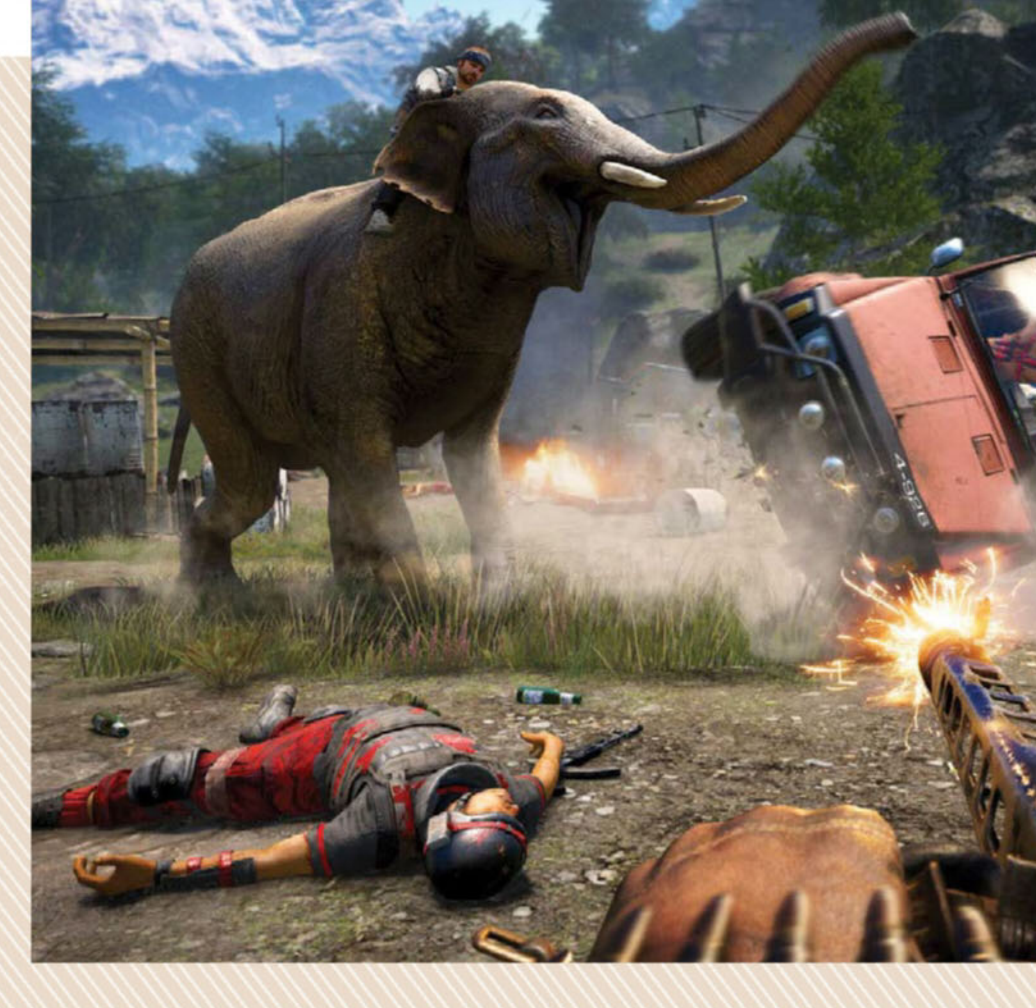
Portraying such potentially complicated ideas without a leading light is a difficult task, right? Soulban raises a smile at the question and, by means of calm authority »

» and straightforwardness that seems to be something of a trademark of his, shakes in head.

"Actually, no. I would go as far as to say that it's easier to write a silent protagonist from my perspective," he explains. "It does, however, remain a technical challenge from a narrative design angle. The thing is that, when you create a character that serves as a vehicle for the player, you're always worried about what you're writing being hollow and not resonating with the player.

"On the other side, though, when you have a character with a strong personality and sense of self-identity, you're inevitably going to alienate a certain portion of your audience. Strong characters will react to things in ways that the player may not agree with." Some people might say that a player disagreeing with the actions of their character is more than acceptable, that this kind of discourse forces you to engage with the narrative more deeply by means of your discomfort with it. Others would take the view that if you don't feel at one with your character at all times then why play them at all?





In order to prevent silent characters feeling, to use Soulban's language, 'hollow' a common plot mechanic is to make the antagonist as strong as possible and bring them very much to the centre of your actions and reactions. This is very much the case in many games that feature the very best of silent characters, including *Portal*'s Chell, *BioShock*'s Jack and *Dishonored*'s Corvo. While Ghale does have a natural and flamboyant antagonistic foe in the form of warlord Pagan Min, Soulban is keen to avoid him becoming so much of a distraction that he feels like the sole cause of your choices and their consequences. That job falls instead to an entire nation.

"After deciding that we were going to focus on the player experience, it was then a case of discussing the idea that the real character, the true centrepiece of *Far Cry 4*, should be the country of Kyrat," Soulban says, in an attempt to the make point abundantly clear. "It's essentially about providing that open playground to explore, but doing so in a way that makes you feel as though you're discovering this country at the same time as Ajay. That way we can make the player feel vitally important in this world. To further strengthen that bond we decided to tie the back story of Kyrat itself to elements of Ajay's back story."

For fear of spoiling the plot, Soulban refuses to give any new or meaningful information on exactly what this link entails and how it impacts the game. The balance that needs to be found within the delivery of the partially unified back story, however, comes from working out how to present a character with a defined past in a way that doesn't hinder the player's exploration and discovery.

Should Ajay's history determine events too strongly, players won't feel as though their choices are their own. Conversely, should Ajay's experiences not determine events at all, then the back story, and in turn the whole character, will feel weak and lazily constructed. Soulban is confident that such a balance has been achieved and is clearly proud of his part in *Far Cry 4*'s development, not least when it comes to solving these narrative quandaries that arrive when you put the environment itself in the starring role. "In a way it was liberating to say 'here are the systems, this is the playground and everything is provided for you'", says Soulban. "As far as narrative systems go, that means working out how all of the back stories interconnect and how the side-quests are made relevant in a way that gives them a sense of attachment and belonging within the world.

"We had to worry about all of those things, but we didn't have to worry about saying explicitly something about the world or something about how the character views the world. It's more about players taking away the experience they want to take away. We want you to decide what kind of person you're going to be within the confines of this location we've made." It's the possibilities within the confines of Kyrat that is the key point. A lot can happen in only a couple of

"THE REAL CHARACTER, THE TRUE CENTREPIECE OF FAR CRY 4, SHOULD BE THE COUNTRY OF KYRAT"







• Riding an elephant and instructing it to kill enemies with its trunk is deeply entertaining in a primal kind of way.



hours playing *Far Cry 4*. You can ride elephants, kill using elephants, hunt tigers, fly microlights, drive and crash cars, raid enemy strongholds, pray at temples, scale cliffs, get charged by rhinos, deliver packages and compete in races. The list goes on and gets exponentially more complex as you start combining the options. Complexity means there's more chance that something will happen that will disrupt the digital illusion and destabilise that connection between place and plot.



Something like *Grand Theft Auto* offers a glimpse at how to make a world so full of variety and possibility feel believable and stable by, essentially, allowing anything to happen. By facilitating and promoting outlandish and over-the-top acts of insanity, nothing ever feels out of place. A world needs only to feel consistent in relation to itself to feel believable and when 'crazy' is the norm you can get away with anything. *Far Cry 4* might have its door wide open in terms of possibility, but it's presenting a narrative graver and more explicit in its importance than anything *GTA* would want to portray.

The plight of a nation's people and culture in the face of villainy and terror is a living reality for too many in today's world and, as such, it's not a topic that can be taken so lightly as tearing sarcastically into Western pop culture. While Soulban believes that writing a silent protagonist is relatively straightforward, it's less easy to drive a respectable and touching narrative through a world designed to be far from predictable. "Yeah, that part of it is quite tough," admits Soulban. "It requires you to perform a few mental exercises to make it work because what it comes down to is problem solving. What experienced videogame writers understand, and it's something I am forever telling newcomers, is that you must always be thinking about how to overcome problems and always expect to encounter them. It's not enough to be seen as only a writer, you have to work to overcome issues with others that aren't writers. »

As in previous games, it's vital to scout enemy positions before taking those first steps to liberate the area. Highlighting the location of alarms is especially important as reinforcements invariably make your life significantly more difficult.



BRANCHING THE NARRATIVE

Player choice is great, but not if it weakens cohesion

At some point in your exploration of Kyrat you're going to have make a decision regarding which branch of the Golden Path to side with. Led by two of the group's stronger personalities, these branches both ultimately want the same thing but have very different ideas about how to achieve it.

These sorts of narrative splits are common in open-world games, presenting the audience with plenty of opportunity to discuss with friends how their experiences altered from one another. Such opportunity comes at the risk of making the different strands feel underdeveloped in comparison with a game that puts all of its effort into a single, cohesive plot.

Soulban is intimately aware of that danger and is keen to not fall into the trap: "Giving the player a choice of who to support is key, whilst making sure whatever decision they make feels meaningful to them and the world they're in. On top of that, we also need to give the player the option of changing their mind down the line. Again, those changes need to feel meaningful and come across as realistic within the limits of the world.

"Somewhere along the way, though, you're probably going to have to decide which route to take through the game and stick with it. Your actions influence what happens to the Golden Path and there will be a point where there is no turning back. It's about you having to make the tough choices and having to learn to live with your decisions."



- ABOVE RIGHT: Cutscenes do appear, but are limited in number. The quantity of side-missions and optional quests you embark on dictate their frequency.
- BELOW LEFT: When it comes to vehicles, cars are not the only option. They're joined by quad bikes, pickup trucks, hand gliders, boats and microlights, the latter allowing you to hover in the air and take out enemies from a relatively safe position.

"WE WANT OUR VILLAINS TO RESONATE INCREDIBLY STRONGLY WITH PLAYERS. THEY ARE PIVOTAL AND ESSENTIAL TO EVERYTHING"

"When you have the narrative team working closely with the other design departments it feels as though you're there in the middle of the storm, solving different problems and generally being a part of the wider process of getting the game made to a high standard. That forces you to think way outside of your usual box because you can't say to yourself 'This is my story and I'm the only one responsible for that'.

"We're really trying to avoid having our pacing be: action, action, action, cutscene and repeat until the game is over. What we want is a narrative that feels cohesive within the world of Kyrat, or wherever we base our games. There's so much to take into account, but I'll be honest and say that it can sometimes be a really rock 'n' roll experience because of that." Rock 'n' roll the act of writing may be, but it pales in the face of antagonist Pagan Min's penchant for embellishment and excessive behaviour. His flamboyant fashion sense, egocentric haircut and seemingly total lack of empathy for anything and everyone make him as magnetic as he is egotistical, a psychopath and narcissist rolled into one. A true rock star.



On the surface this behaviour mirrors the country of Kyrat that he has taken dictatorial control over in that both are unpredictable in their moment-to-moment offering. The difference is that Min, when you take a step back, has his own focused agenda that he aims to fulfil, whereas the world is there to help you define and strengthen your own goals. Min's consistent focus and authority is the thing that gives your actions meaning as, despite being able to alter your own journey, the endpoint remains the destruction of his power. "The villains are always the most difficult thing to create in our games," says Soulban, "because we want them to resonate incredibly strongly with players. They are pivotal and essential to everything.

"We approached Pagan Min by asking what is he doing here [in Kyrat] and how do his actions serve his wider agenda? In a lot of ways he has a far stronger presence in the world than Ajay does, but that's been done deliberately to allow him to be the lynchpin around which other things revolve. Pagan Min has to have a strong presence and feel like someone that, to a large extent, feels like the antithesis of what you'd expect to find in a country like Kyrat. He has to feel very much as though he is something different from what the audience expects from the Himalayas."

When it comes to depicting a region and a culture it's one thing to meet and subvert audience expectations, but it's another entirely to present elements in a way that is respectful. Given that eccentric and erratic events are par for the *Far Cry* course it would be relatively simple to both insult and alienate those areas of the world from which you've taken influence. Additionally, it would be easy to spread ignorance of those same areas by serving audiences a wholly inaccurate and tainted picture.

This is one the reasons the team decided to craft a fictional setting; it gives them the freedom to tell the story they want to tell without devaluing or insulting a past or present reality. Nepal, India and the extended Himalayan region has been borrowed from to create Kyrat, making the amalgamated environment feel more like a broad fantasy setting in terms of its geography than a singular nation that could conceivably sit alongside Bhutan or Tibet.

From that combination of Himalayan components, twists and exaggerations have been applied to "make the narrative more intriguing and give us the ability to include ideas that support level design". Nowhere is this more obvious than in the construction of the Golden Path, a rebel group fighting to wrestle control away from Min and his army. "The Golden Path is a mixture of many different things, but what gives it its core interest is the rift going on within it and where the different arguments regarding its future are leaning," says Soulban.

"In my mind I think of the Golden Path as an extrapolation of where things might possibly go for an organisation that start off as an underdog with little hope, but then realises it has the opportunity to make

MEET THE STARS

Shining a light on the actors responsible for bringing *Far Cry 4*'s characters to life



PAGAN MIN

PLAYED BY: **TROY BAKER**

● It's getting tough to pick out a game that Troy Baker doesn't star in, the Texas native having appeared in *The Last of Us, Bioshock Infinite, Middle-Earth: Shadow Of Mordor* and *InFamous: Second Son* in the past 18 months alone. Over the next few months you'll also see him in *COD: AW, Lego Batman 3, Metal Gear Solid V: Phantom Pain* and, of course, *Far Cry 4*.



HURK

PLAYED BY: **DYLAN TAYLOR**

● Hurk is your co-op buddy. Whenever a friend joins your game they will be playing as the bandana-wearing, muscle-bound extrovert as voiced by Dylan Taylor. Taylor's experience in video game acting is limited, his only appearance coming in *Far Cry 3* as the same character. His film acting highlights include Charlie Bartlett and Terry Gilliam's *Tideland*.



NOORE

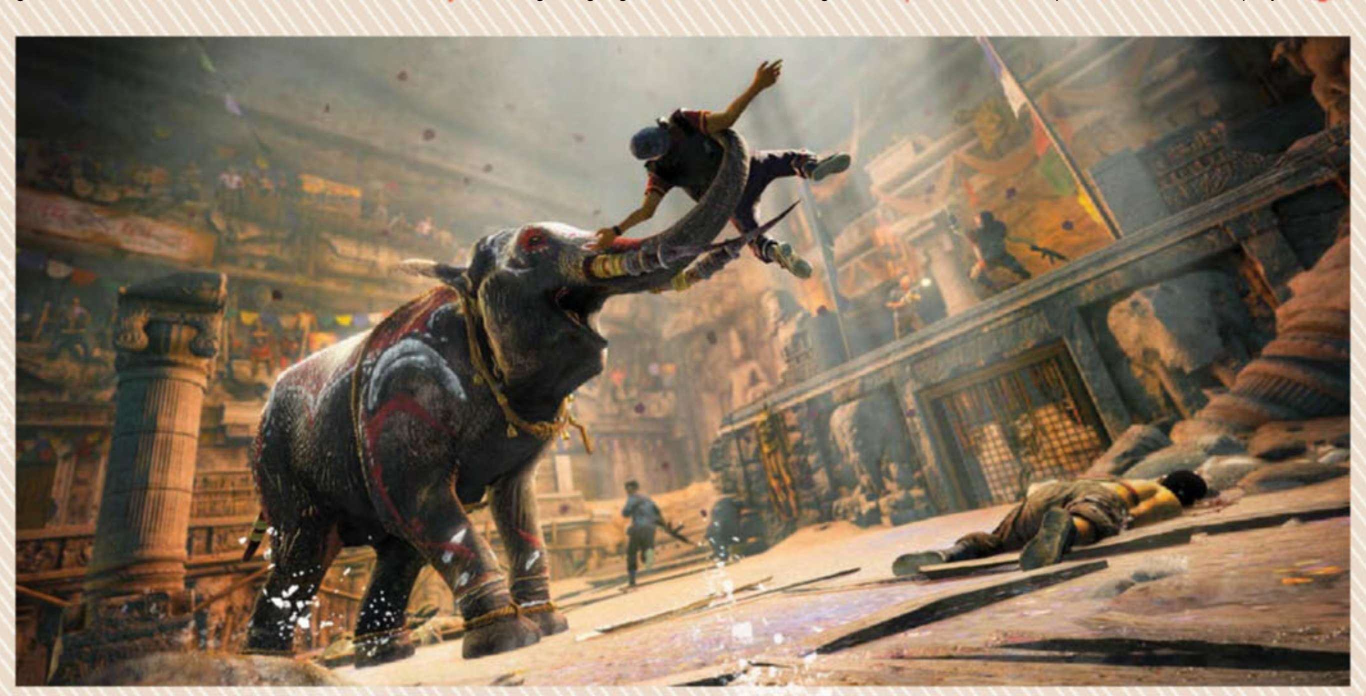
PLAYED BY: **MYLENE DINH-ROBIC**

● Mylene Dinh-Robic is becoming somewhat of a regular in video game acting circles, having worked recently with Ubisoft on *Assassin's Creed III, Far Cry 3* and *Watch Dogs*. Away from games, her portfolio is filling up with roles for TV shows, most notably *Being Human* and *19-2*. Her voice acting talent has also seen her appear in *The Smurfs 2*.

a significant impact to events affecting them and their country. We're drawing from what inspires us about these locations and their histories so, while we have looked at certain things and decided to avoid it because it may be rude to a culture, what is in the game is fiction. It's not a documentary."

As a game, *Far Cry 4* requires a direction of thinking that is entirely different to that of film, literature and other expressive forms. The problem with tying interactivity with narrative is not a hurdle exclusive to videogames, but it's within this medium that the dilemma is at its most obvious and far-reaching. A game such as this, where freedom of movement and action are part of its very fabric, must be personal yet grand, individual yet diverse.

"Working in videogames is one of the most dynamic experiences a writer could possibly undergo. You need to think about problems as a good thing and welcome the changes that come from them," Soulban thinks aloud. "You're not in the shadows here like you can be in other mediums; game writers are in the front line and must be constantly ready to react to new things. Every game I've worked on has been so different in terms of process. It makes new projects exciting because you're never quite sure how things are going to work. It's those challenges that keep you active and engaged in the work." For *Far Cry 4* to succeed in the way that Soulban hopes that it will, it must allow the player to go through that same experience of being excited as a result of never quite knowing when and which challenges must be overcome. All the while it must present a narrative that gives meaning to our actions and make sense within the varied environment that it presents. Without either of these halves, the whole will seem incomplete and hollow, absent from the support and meaning that they embed one another with, but if *Far Cry 4* manages to hit this balance, then Ajay might one day be considered the equal of Freeman and company.



THE NEXT GEN OF iPHONE GAMING

In the face of increased competition and new markets in the East, Apple is looking to bring in the next generation of mobile gaming. We took a closer look with the help of iPhone developers to see if it has made a platform that gamers can embrace





You might not think it, but the iPhone is in a battle for its very survival right now. All the big smartphones are, in fact. While Apple is credited with bringing the smartphone into the mainstream and remains the biggest brand name around, the imitators and innovators have beaten it again and again in expanding their reach. Apple was beaten to market on a smartwatch. It was beaten on bigger phones. But with the arrival of the iPhone 6 and iPhone 6 Plus it has targeted a new front for the smartphone war: gaming.

Since every possible phone size variation exists on the market, hardware is constantly getting more powerful, and apps deliver most of the services anyone could want, standing out from the pack in the smartphone world means finding something of genuine value that your competition doesn't have. In the past, Apple had build quality as a pretty significant lead on the competition, but the likes of Samsung and HTC have caught up. To address it, Apple put hardcore gaming front and centre of its pitch for iPhone 6 and its new operating system, iOS 8. By debuting a *League Of Legends*-like MOBA called *Vainglory* running on the iPhone to show off its newest hardware, Apple was courting gamers and showing that it could deliver a mobile gaming experience like no other. With a new development platform called Metal, it courted developers, promising access to the full potential of the hardware. Having spoken to those who are already working with the new iPhone, it's clear that it's winning hearts and minds already.

"Metal has been fantastic," enthuses Mark Rein, vice president of Epic Games, when we speak to him. "It provides us with much lower level access to the hardware, which is something that we've been wanting for a long time. It kind of gives us more of a desktop-like power than what we've had in mobile phones before working through OpenGL ES." For those who don't know, OpenGL Embedded Systems is a cross-platform computer graphics rendering system, common for developing 2D and 3D games for smartphones and consoles. Metal takes its place, sitting between the demands of the game and the iPhone 6's A8 processor, delivering and interpreting information faster than OpenGL ES did.

"The main advantage of Metal is that it allows us to get closer to the GPU hardware," Bartosz Brzostek, CTO of 11 Bit Studios, explains to us. "The layer between our code and the GPU is thinner, forcing us to better understand and utilise the underlying the hardware. At first it might sound as an additional complication, and in fact it is – it took me a few weeks to refactor our code to be Metal friendly. However the benefits are huge." Having brought the complex and graphically intensive *Anomaly* series to iOS, 11 Bit is a studio well placed to test the power of the new devices. And other developers are already looking at how they can deliver Metal-exclusive content that just won't be possible on other platforms.

> Metal gives us more of a desktop-like power than we've had in mobiles

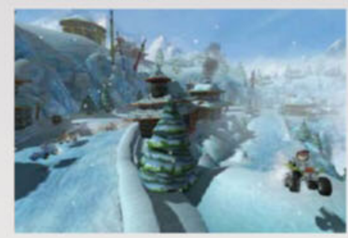
"As a programmer, I'm excited going forward to do more interesting things that are made possible with Metal," reveals Ralf Knoesel, CTO and co-founder of Vector Unit Inc., maker of *Beach Buggy Racing*. "Our strategy will be to make new effects as cool as possible on Metal, and then worry about porting to OpenGL ES (if possible). There will certainly be some effects that are Metal-only."

Likewise for Epic Games, it was a call to arms to make sure its Unreal Engine 4 was there for all to see, bringing a free tech demo called *Epic Zen Garden* to the iPhone 6 and iPad Air to show off what will be possible for developers through Metal and Unreal. "We have a *lot* of people using Unreal Engine 4 and a lot of them are creating great stuff for mobile whether it's on iOS or Android, so we wanted to make sure that when Metal was ready that the engine was ready for these people to do really spectacular things," explains Rein. "I mean, Unreal Engine 4 is generally regarded as a high-end engine, so when Apple enabled us to use more high-end features it was like waving a green flag or telling us to get going. We didn't waste any time in jumping in on it."

But is it all about graphics? The most successful games on iPhone and Android over the years have been titles like *Angry Birds* and *Doodle Jump*, not exactly known for their visual prowess. Mark Rein believes the capabilities of the iPhone 6 are just too enticing for developers not to push their visuals forward. "We are seeing capabilities now on these phones that allow us to do vastly improved things and I think that that gives the developers freedom," he explains. "Going back many, many years to the original Unreal Engine, the first thing that someone builds often brings their computer to its knees, because they go 'Oh, I can put all













■ Even before Metal, the mobile gaming world was making leaps forward in terms of their complexity. Seeing *BioShock* land on iPhone was a massive sign of how much more games can do on mobiles.

this stuff in', and they don't realise there's a performance price to be paid for everything you put into a 3D scene. So people often build something that brings their computer down to a crawl and that's especially true on mobile. Now with things like Metal and more and more powerful hardware behind it, we're giving developers the ability to dream big."

"Graphics are nice, but they don't make for a good game by themselves," counters Knoesel. "Sure, there'll be a few tech demo-style games which will give players a few 'Wow' moments when they get their new phone, but it's not going to keep them entertained and playing. I think the iPhone 6 is more likely to create an expectation of good graphics for certain types of genres (3D action, racing, etc)."

Johannes Vuorinen, CEO, coder and co-founder at Frogmind, maker of indie hit *Badland*, agrees the power can be used in other ways. "Adding performance lets you make more choices about your visual approach though, which is good. In *Badland*'s case, we were able to add extra visual candy for iPhone 6 and 6 Plus, because of its greater GPU performance."

3D worlds, chasing graphical fidelity, Unreal Engine, exclusive platform content; it's all starting to sound rather more like the console world than what we would expect from mobile phones. It rather begs the question, is the iPhone even competing solely against other phones? Or is it now competing with consoles? "I've never thought that it wasn't," Rein responds. "Everything you do in gaming competes for your time. Whether you're sitting down playing a game of *Threes* or *Angry Birds* or whether you're playing *FIFA* on your console or some really high end game on your PC. Everything competes for your time, so I never really thought of them not as competition."

Knoesel, though, thinks the competition is more limited to portable devices and in this respect there's really no contest at all. "I suppose handheld platforms such as the 3DS or PSP are the main competition for this play pattern, but that battle never even materialised," he explained. "The dedicated handhelds are just not as convenient to carry around as your phone."

An interesting point of singularity that would put mobiles on a collision course with more traditional gaming platforms is greater integration and communication with other devices "It will be interesting to see if or when mobile and TV platforms will merge so that you can enjoy the same game on both platforms seamlessly with the same progress and everything." Vuorinen adds, which is an outcome more an more likely with devices like Apple TV and Google Chrome out in the world.

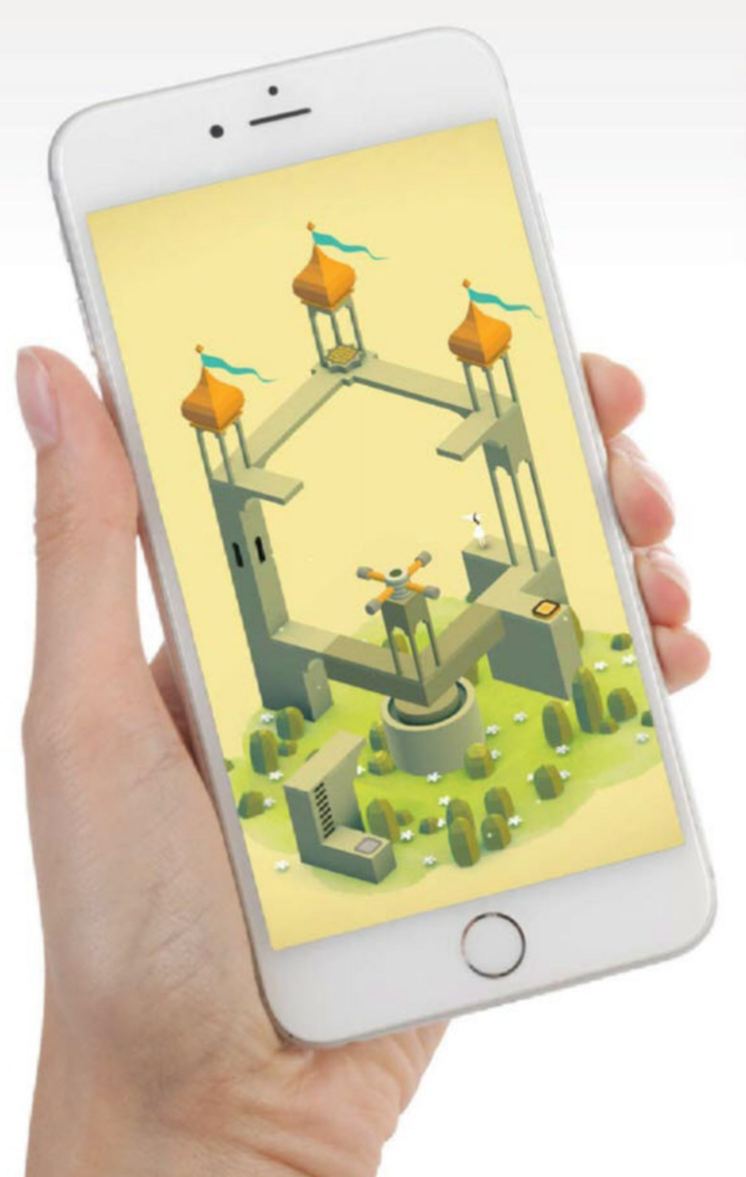
My kids play Minecraft on iPad as if that's how it was meant to be played

For Rein, though, the real excitement appears to be in experiences that bridge the gap between platforms or can adapt to different forms of distribution. "If you look at a game like *Minecraft*, it was obviously a keyboard and mouse game to start off with, but my kids play it on their iPads as if that's how it was meant to be played," he tells us. "I'll play *FIFA* on pretty much anything I can play it on. Obviously on a PC I don't use a keyboard, I hook up an Xbox controller to my laptop, but I'll play it on a console and I'll play it on a phone or tablet. I think there are definitely experiences that transcend all those devices. The more powerful the hardware gets, the more enticing the experiences on that device."

We've already seen attempts at bringing high-end titles to mobile devices. *BioShock* has already been brought to iPhone and iPad this year and that was before the announcement of the iPhone 6 and its Metal development platform. Epic continues to push boundaries with games like *Infinity Blade*, and deeper experiences can't be too far away. However, Brzostek sounds a note of caution as to the future success of these higher-end games and the popularity of gaming on iPhone 6. For him there's a bigger trend than graphical improvements to keep an eye on.

"What I'm afraid of is the ubiquitous F2P [free to play] model," he warns. "In my honest opinion, many gameplay experiences are broken when converted to F2P. I've noticed it's more difficult to find a good game for my son, and he's slowly becoming more of a console player. It's sad, because the mobile device itself is very convenient to use."

In-app purchases and F2P are pretty common in the mobile gaming world and becoming more common on consoles and PCs too, as it happens, but there's hope that the potential of the hardware could steer publishers towards more traditional models. Even if prices are low, there's plenty of money to be made and that attracts a lot of new suitors to the mobile world. "There's no question the industry is taking mobile games more seriously," Rein insists. "In fact, if you look at some of the companies that have sprung up around mobile games now and see how big they are and how much money they're worth and it's just incredible." Knoesel feels similarly. "For the player,







Dedicated handhelds are just not as easy to carry around

there's a huge supply of high-quality games out there, which isn't likely to slow down any time soon. From a business perspective, the smartphone game market is continuing to show dramatic growth, which is resulting in massive investments being made."

And we shouldn't ignore the impact that the screen size is going to have on attracting players to the iPhone 6 and 6 Plus. With a 1920x1080 resolution on the 5.5 inch 6 Plus Retina display, the screen offers a better quality and size of image than even PS Vita players get, in a device that's about the same height and width as a 3DS XL. Apple has delivered a size of device that may seem a little excessive for those who only want a smartphone to make calls and play music, but which is perfect for playing games and immersing yourself in media.

"I suppose there are some games out there which work better with the smaller screens (playing *Doodle Jump* with one hand, etc), but having a larger screen definitely makes for a better experience with most types of games," is Knoesel's take on things. "It's great for immersive 3D gaming and games with dense user interfaces." Rein agrees that the screen size could be a big draw for gamers looking for a new platform. "I think the screen size will definitely help. I picked up one of each of the iPhone 6 and the 6 Plus and to me they're both awesome. It's just a question of whether you're willing to carry the bigger one or not. If you are, you get a great gaming experience.

"Especially for older guys like me whose eyes are starting to go. It's nice to have a bigger screen and not a drastically bigger device with the iPhone 6. It feels us if it just nudges the corners a bit of the iPhone 5S, which was the perfect size in my opinion, they just nailed it with that, and yet the screen feels a lot bigger."

As Apple appeals to hardcore gamers with a more powerful, better-resolution device and gives developers the tools and access they need to create a next-gen of iPhone gaming, is there a risk that the indie developers who have been so successful on iPhone before could be squeezed out? Our panel of experts doesn't think so. "As the market gets crowded it is more difficult to become successful," concedes Brzostek. "However we believe there is still a lot of space for innovative gameplay ideas, executed at the high level. Gaming is entertainment, and new, fresh ideas are always welcome."

"The beauty of the mobile market is that an independent

THE METAL HEADS

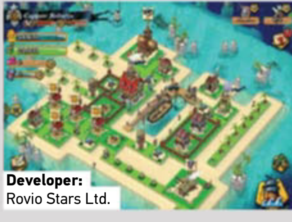
The games that are already enhanced by Metal and looking to lead the next-gen of iPhone experiences



Developer: Epic Games

EPIC ZEN GARDEN

Mixing contemporary architecture with a traditional Japanese garden and placing it all in a world that looks like it's been taken straight out of *Avatar*, *Epic Zen Garden* is a great showcase of the versatility of the Unreal Engine 4. And that's exactly what it's supposed to be: a showcase. There's no real game to this title other than to explore, and the results are often very impressive.



Developer: Rovio Stars Ltd.

PLUNDER PIRATES

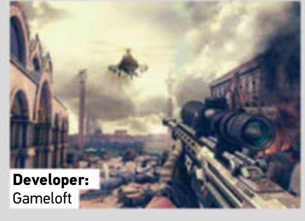
Real-time strategy gets a little of the *Angry Birds* treatment as Rovio teams up with Midoki to bring *Plunder Pirates* to iPhone 6 and tablets. It's like *Civilization Revolution*, but with a lot less peace and a lot more booty. The added optimisation made available by Metal means that the game should render and handle its units far more smoothly than on iPhone 5 previously.



Developer: Vector Unit Inc

BEACH BUGGY RACING

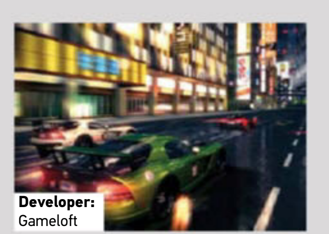
No new platform can consider itself complete without a solid karting experience and thanks to Vector Unit the iPhone 6 has one. With its bright cartoon graphics, 12 tracks and customisable cars there's plenty to enjoy here. Using the tools of Metal has given it enhanced graphical performance, real-time lighting and shadows and smoother frame-rates.



Developer: Gameloft

MODERN COMBAT 5: BLACKOUT

While the *Modern Combat* series started out feeling like a spin off from the success of *Call Of Duty*, it has refined and improved over the years to be one of the best examples of FPS gameplay on smartphones that you'll find. Thanks to Metal, its graphics, which have always been impressive on small devices, are sublime and the action looks more intense than ever.



Developer: Gameloft

ASPHALT 8: AIRBORNE

While *Asphalt 8* moved to the F2P model a while back, it's still packed with content like 56 cars, nine locations, 180 events in career mode and so much more. The big draw though is the incredible lighting, shadows, textures and effects you get to see on the screen. It looks superb on the iPhone 6 Plus Retina display.



developer can quickly publish a good game with an appropriate low-fidelity art style and have it be a huge success," added Knoesel. "Mobile phone players want to be entertained for a few minutes at a time and are perfectly happy to play something with a high quality but low fidelity art style. Tablet players will expect a bit more graphical oomph since they tend to play longer sessions at much higher resolution. On a positive note, I believe that the adoption of high-powered devices such as the iPhone 6 will lead to more innovation. Developers can afford to spend less time optimising around limitations and more time making a fun game!"

While admitting that higher budgets associated with better performing games can lead to risk aversion, Vuorinen doesn't believe it will hurt indies so long as they make good use of social media to get the word out. "Virality can make something unique go large quickly even without any marketing budget," he tells us. "The key thing is uniqueness to stand out. That's exactly what we did with *Badland*."

Rein adds that the extra power should actually give smaller teams a little more headroom, allowing them concentrate on the ideas and less on the optimisation that could delay a game from hitting iTunes. "As we make our engine better and we give better and better tools that really empower artists and programmers to build much more complex games much faster, I think that also empowers the indie game developer to be more competitive with the higher end. You can pick up Unreal Engine 4 for $19 a month and you'll have the same tools that big companies are paying millions of dollars for. I think that actually empowers developers."



■ *Epic Zen Garden* is quite openly a tech demo for Epic Games' Unreal Engine 4 on iPhone.

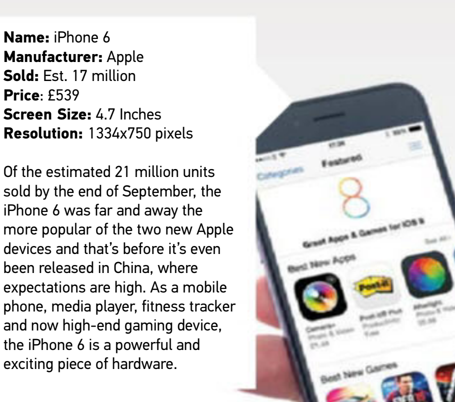
THE BIG SCREEN BATTLE

Here's how the major mobile gaming platforms compare in terms of screen size and resolution



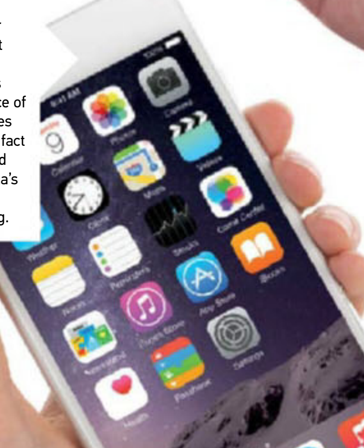
Name: Nintendo 3DS
Manufacturer: Nintendo
Sold: 44.14 million
Price: £149.99
Screen Size: 4.88 inches (top screens)
Resolution: 400x240 (800x240 for 3D) pixels

The success and popularity of the 3DS seems to fluctuate wildly depending on whatever the last big release was for the platform. When a new *Mario*, *Zelda*, *Pokémon* or *Super Smash Bros.* comes out it gets a nice boost and then it seems to fall away. Its total sales across iterations remains impressive though and the low price point will keep it attractive as an entry point for young gamers.



Name: iPhone 6
Manufacturer: Apple
Sold: Est. 17 million
Price: £539
Screen Size: 4.7 Inches
Resolution: 1334x750 pixels

Of the estimated 21 million units sold by the end of September, the iPhone 6 was far and away the more popular of the two new Apple devices and that's before it's even been released in China, where expectations are high. As a mobile phone, media player, fitness tracker and now high-end gaming device, the iPhone 6 is a powerful and exciting piece of hardware.



Name: iPhone 6 Plus
Manufacturer: Apple
Sold: Est. 4 million
Price: £619
Screen Size: 5.5 inches
Resolution: 1920x1080 pixels

Despite the seeming clamour for a larger iPhone, the 6 Plus hasn't sold anywhere near as much as the iPhone 6, but then again, it is perhaps more of a specialist piece of kit for those who like their devices to do more than make calls. The fact that it's managed to reach around 40 per cent of the PlayStation Vita's sales in under a month would suggest this is only the beginning.

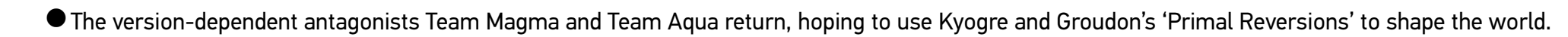
Name: PlayStation Vita
Manufacturer: Sony
Sold: Est. 10 million
Price: £179.99
Screen Size: 5 Inches
Resolution: 960x544 pixels

Increasingly popular with hardcore gamers thanks to its connectivity with PlayStation 4, its wide range of excellent games and its relative value, the PS Vita had a difficult start, but is beginning to find a home in this new console and handheld landscape. As the PS4 goes from strength to strength, expect Sony to make another big push for its handheld device.



REMAKING HISTORY

Pokémon Ruby and Sapphire were the GameBoy Advance's best selling titles – weighing in at an impressive 22.32 million sales across both. 12 years after the games went on sale, can Game Freak recreate the success of the series' most valuable gems? We talk to veteran Pokémon director, now producer, Junichi Masuda, and Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire's director, Shigeru Ohmori, about the 3DS remakes





The version-dependent antagonists Team Magma and Team Aqua return, hoping to use Kyogre and Groudon's 'Primal Reversions' to shape the world.







***Pokémon FireRed* and *LeafGreen* sold in excess of 11 million copies on the GameBoy Advance.** *Pokémon HeartGold* and *SoulSilver* hit over 12.5 million sales on the Nintendo DS – more than the estimated sales for the most recent canonical releases, *X* and *Y* (which officially sold just over 12 million). There's good money for Nintendo and Game Freak in the remake business; after all, nostalgia sells, and the dual markets of newcomers to the series and *Pokémon* veterans make for a lucrative target audience.

But it would be cynical to suggest the only motive behind recreating these games is money – after all, between remakes and original releases, there's been an annual *Pokémon* game for the last five years. A remake gives Game Freak and The Pokémon Company more time to work on the next original instalment in the 18-year-old franchise while a younger team of designers uses the templates of older games to perfect their craft.

"Even before development started, right at the beginning of [the process] two years ago, we had the ten year anniversary of *Ruby* and *Sapphire*," explains the director of the originals and long-term *Pokémon* virtuoso, Junichi Masuda, "Mr Ohmori and I were both out drinking together, and I said to him, 'I want you to be the director on these remakes!'"

"At the time, we were still really in the development of *Pokémon X* and *Y*," Shigeru Ohmori continues, "we were just about to start with all the debug stuff so we were super busy. I remember being excited but also really worried about working on the remakes." It was a big step for Ohmori – a developer that had cut his teeth planning the maps and

There are a lot of ideas I had at the time that didn't get into the final game. Finally, I get the chance to implement them, 12 years after it began

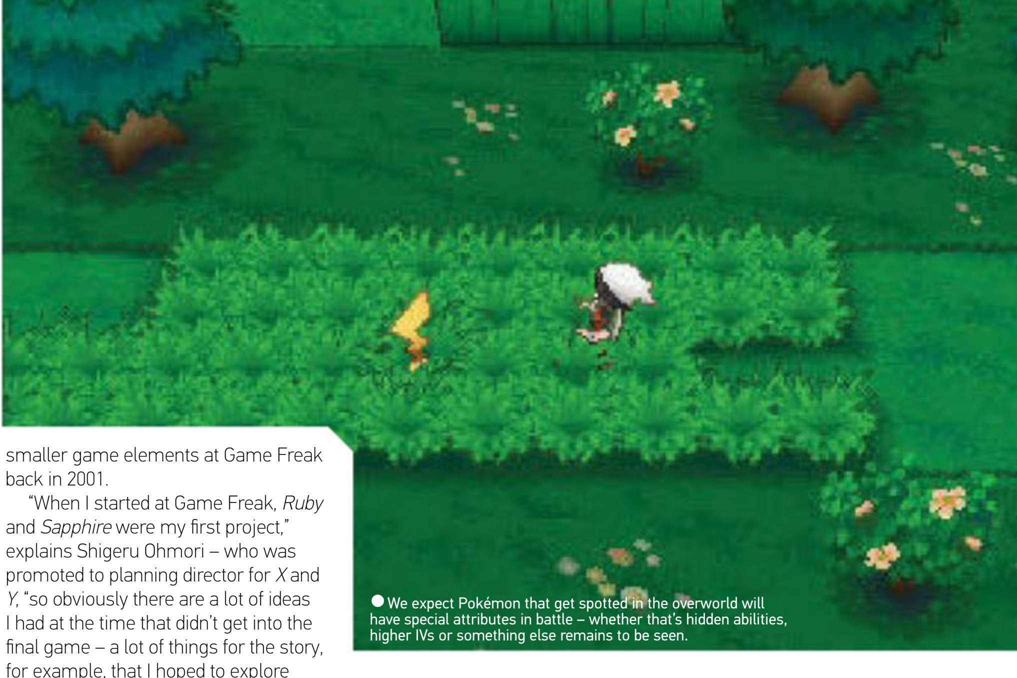
The Sky's The Limit

FOR THE FIRST time in a Pokémon game, flying means more than just booting up a HM to get to some faraway city – you can now navigate to any individual route, pretty much flying a *Final Fantasy*-esque airship there in the form of Mega Latios/Latias.

This new method of navigation will also open up new islands and post-game content that can only be accessed via an Eon Ticket (which, in turn, grants you the Eon Flute – used to summon Mega Latios/Latias at will). You can encounter rare Pokémon in cloud formations and, according to Ohmori, all of the legendary Pokémon from every game will be available between *Omega Ruby*/*Alpha Sapphire*: all of which can be accessed through portals on the new islands, or found coasting in the skies above Hoenn.



● A bird's eye view of Hoenn? You spoil us, Game Freak.



● We expect Pokémon that get spotted in the overworld will have special attributes in battle – whether that's hidden abilities, higher IVs or something else remains to be seen.

smaller game elements at Game Freak back in 2001.

"When I started at Game Freak, *Ruby* and *Sapphire* were my first project," explains Shigeru Ohmori – who was promoted to planning director for *X* and *Y*, "so obviously there are a lot of ideas I had at the time that didn't get into the final game – a lot of things for the story, for example, that I hoped to explore more in depth. Finally taking all those ideas, I get the chance to implement them and to go more in depth on them, 12 years after it began."

Remake culture in the current gaming climate is stale – a lot of developers are choosing to simply upscale the original code to wrangle it onto new hardware. But the *Pokémon* games will go further than that, completely remaking the original titles from the ground up. *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* will use the same 3D engine *X* and *Y* were built on – the first time Trainers will be seeing any of the pre-*X* and *Y* games in more detail than just overhead 2D. Starting from scratch also allows Game Freak to take advantage of design elements that perhaps weren't as well realised the first time around…

"One of the main goals, one of the main themes that I had in mind when I first started working on the *Pokémon* games with *Ruby* and *Sapphire*, and the impression I had at the time, was that that was really the first time *Pokémon* had entered full colour," reveals Ohmori, referring to the GameBoy Advance's 15-bit BGR colour support. "The way the colours were used to create this feeling of nature left an impression on me, so I really wanted *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* to translate that to the new systems, and pay attention to how we used colour, and create that same feeling."

You'll actually hear Pokémon cries as you're walking around the environment

The original *Ruby* and *Sapphire* games took a much more rural approach to world design than their predecessors – something perhaps orchestrated to show off the hardware capabilities of the GameBoy Advance. "Kanto and Johto were based more on the motif of Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka – big cities in Japan, with people living in a more metropolitan feel," explains Masuda, when we asked about why *Ruby* and *Sapphire* felt so much more natural and pastoral than their prequels. "With the Hoenn region I wanted to go for a feel of abundant nature, so a lot of mountains and forests. When I was younger, my grandparents lived in Kyushu and I would visit them, and whenever I was there I'd always be catching bugs, playing in the river, catching fish and stuff like that, so I wanted to bring that feeling of nature to the games."

It was this feeling of being intimately involved with the environment that Game Freak wanted to recreate in the original games, and despite the new soundscapes, richly coloured vistas and more detailed environments, the comparatively basic technology of the GameBoy Advance was still holding the studio back.

"One of the things with *Ruby* and *Sapphire* is that you'll actually hear Pokémon cries as you're walking around the environment," reflects Ohmori, "but we wanted to go more in depth with that, even at the time, and actually have Pokémon appear in the game world. For example, you can see their silhouette or see a Pokémon flying overhead – these are elements and ideas we've been able to flesh out properly in the remakes."

And they really have. It's something of a game-changer – seeing a little Pikachu tail popping out indicates the lil' electric mouse will be inhabiting that patch of grass. By using the 3DS' second screen, you can get a more intimate view of what's going on around you – Pokémon already encountered are shown as sprites (a nice throwback to pre-X and Y), whilst those yet to be registered on the Pokédex are greyed out. Wild monsters spotted this way will have different movepools to regular finds (which makes the competitive player in us perk up… is this the new 'Dream World' method?) and may be a higher level than other native species to the area. We anticipate this feature making it easier to catch shiny Pokémon once you acquire the PokéRadar, too, or even


The mini-games that boost your Pokémon's EV stats are back from *X* and *Y*.


We're looking forward to seeing our old favourites in the new 3D engine.


New Megas have been revealed recently, including Mega Pidgeot and Mega Beedrill.


Pokémon Amie makes a return, so we'll be spending far too much time with that again.

We try to focus as much as we can on making the Pokémon appear natural in their setting

being a shortcut to finding Pokémon with higher IVs than usual, if you're into the meta-game that runs beneath *Pokémon*'s unassuming surface.

***Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* also include more cosmetic changes to the overworld, too; Pokémon will fly overhead – our demo with the game saw a flock of Wingull drift above as a Poochyena ran past and hid in a tuft as grass next to us.** It makes Hoenn feel more alive than Kalos did in *X* and Y – which for all its new 3D playfulness, felt quite static. In a game that's all about trying to make you feel involved, that level of cosmetic nuance goes a long way.

"Even with the handheld games, with the visual presentation we try to focus as much as we can on making the Pokémon appear natural in their setting," explains Masuda as we spot a Skitty concealing itself behind some foliage – its cry cutting above the din of rustling and that beautifully remastered soundtrack. "It's not like they're imposing or anything – they'll appear cute, or approachable. Of course, at the same time we really like the 2D sprites as well, so we tried to figure out a balanced way to implement those in the game."

The remakes aren't just going to pay homage to the original Generation III games, though; *X* and *Y* did a lot to change the foundation formula *Pokémon* was based on – introducing Mega Pokémon, for a start – and *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* are going to carry on Game Freak's vision of rolling out Megas across the entire 719-strong Pokémon roster. New additions to the Mega crew include the bizarre choices of Slowbro, Camerupt and Audino, alongside more traditional favourites like Steelix, Beedrill and Pidgeot. But it's the cast of the original Ruby and Sapphire that are getting the most attention – all three starters receive a Mega, as well as Altaria, Sharpedo, Latios and Latias, Sableye, Salamence, the legendary Rayquaza and stalwart fan favourite Metagross.

"One of the unique traits, one of the reasons why people like Pokémon is the fact that they evolve," explains Masuda, "so we wanted to think of a way to make this even more appealing and even better. I discussed this with the battle system designers, the graphic designers and asked 'Well, what can we do?' and we came up with the idea of a Mega Evolution that would take place just during the battle. It makes it so players can keep a Pokémon they like, see it as a Mega, but go back to a form they prefer after the battle."

It was a smart move introducing the Megas to *X* and *Y* – probably the biggest change up to the way Pokémon battles work overall since the original battle formula was laid out. It also meant previously redundant Pokémon were made valid again (in the meta-game, at least) and players that preferred the more aesthetically designed Pokémon had more of a reason to use them in-game. "One of the things we also focused on with *Pokémon X* and *Y* was making it so that some of the cuter Pokémon can be more usable in battle, more viable in battle strategies, so that was one of the things we did with the balance," explains Masuda, with a smile, "I'm a big fan of Pikachu and Psyduck and I never want to evolve them either!"

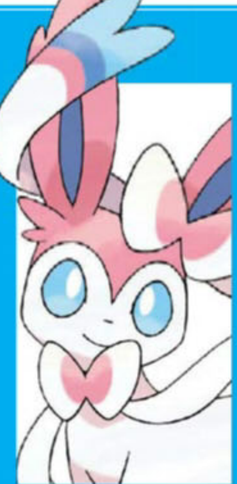
It's clear that Game Freak wants to keep *Pokémon Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* as loyal to their roots as possible, whilst skimming all the best bits off every game that's come since and applying it to *Pokémon*'s core formula. By iterating on the overworld, and tuning the aspects of the game players found a little underwhelming in *X* and *Y* (apparently the end-game in *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* has received the most attention during the remakes), Game Freak is proving that there's certainly room for a *Pokémon* release every year, and that even if it changes its core development team, you can still trust it.

Everyone Has Their Favourites

ON TEAM, WE'RE big fans of Scizor, Kangaskhan, Cloyster and Slowbro. But what about the minds behind Pokémon – what are their favourite mystical critters?

Masuda: "I have a lot of favourites, it's hard to choose! Most recently, after directing *X* and *Y* my current favourite is still Sylveon, the evolution of Eevee. I really like a lot of the more cute Pokémon too, though. My favourite from *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* is one of the new Pokémon, Primal Kyogre. It's very cool-looking."

Ohmori: "My favourite would be one of the new ones from *X* and *Y* –I do have a lot of Pokémon that I like a lot and it's hard to choose a favourite, but from *Pokémon X* and *Y* it's Inkay. I actually came up with the idea for how it evolves, where you have to turn the 3DS upside down. That idea was able to be implemented and was reflected in the design of the Pokémon, too, so it's a really memorable one for me."




13 STEPS TO INDIE STARDOM

SUCCESS IS NEVER GUARANTEED, BUT WITH THIS GUIDE… IT STILL ISN'T GUARANTEED

The world of the bedroom coder has returned – the last few years have seen many a millionaire… well, thousandaire… created because of games made by independent teams and individuals. So it's no surprise that chasing the bucks in the world of development has become a modern gold rush for many. But it's not that easy. And it's not even necessarily lucrative.

People need help, especially when they're starting out, so **games™** thought it would be best to go to those who know. Those who have experienced the highest of highs, the lowest of lows, and the mediocrest of the mediocres. We asked: what one piece of advice would you give someone just starting out?

"SCOPING IS YOUR FRIEND!"

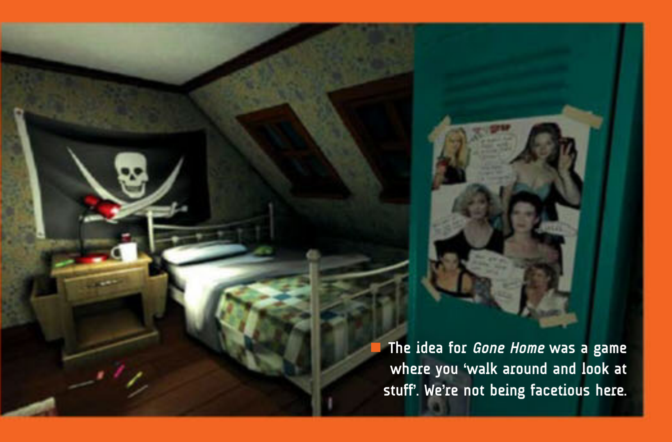


STEVE GAYNOR
THE FULLBRIGHT COMPANY

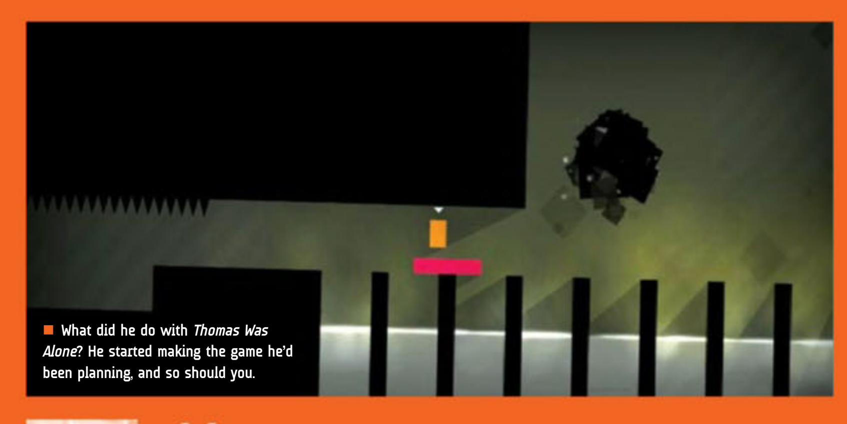
1 FULLBRIGHT CREATED THE lovely *Gone Home*, and the team's Steve Gaynor is one of the three original members of the team. His experience stretches back to companies big and small, with roles at 2K Marin and Irrational Games, as well as TimeGate Studios. He is, in short, an indie dev who has done his time in the corporate machine.

So it's no surprise that Gaynor's experience lends itself to advice that runs counter to the big league thinking. If you're making a game – and you don't have tens of millions of pounds and hundreds of people – you want to keep it in check. Keep everything in check. As Gaynor explained:

"Scoping means keeping the size of your game small enough that you can actually finish it. The basic pitch for *Gone Home* is 'walk around and look at stuff', which sounds pretty easy! But all the little features (map, inventory, audio diaries, examining objects, etc.) add up to make it a way bigger project than it seems on paper. Scope small, and make your small game awesome!"



The idea for *Gone Home* was a game where you 'walk around and look at stuff'. We're not being facetious here.



What did he do with *Thomas Was Alone*? He started making the game he'd been planning, and so should you.

"BE ALREADY MAKING A GAME"



MIKE BITHELL
MIKE BITHELL GAMES

2 IF YOU PLAYED that game about those coloured shapes that had to work together to overcome obstacles – literal obstacles – then you know Mike Bithell's *Thomas Was Alone*. Soon enough you'll know Mike Bithell's *Volume*, too. In fact, if you've paid any attention at all to the indie scene in the last couple of years, you'll know Mike Bithell in some way, shape or form.

It seems those of us who inhabit the dummy sphere could do with a kick up the backside from Mr Bithell, though. His advice is simple, straightforward and seemingly obvious. So it's perfect for a dummy's guide. But it's also the advice that the vast majority of would-be games developers don't actually heed, so it bears repeating:

"There are lots of reasons to put off making that game. Maybe you need to plan more, maybe you need to find an artist, maybe you… no. *Start*. Make your game right now. Set Unity or Gamemaker or whatever downloading."



"MAKE BAD GAMES!"



SOS SOSOWSKI
INDEPEDENT DEVELOPER

3 SOS SOSOWSKI (aka Mikolaj Kaminski) is behind dozens of indie titles, though you probably know him for his work on *McPixel*. The 20-second puzzle/platformer picked up its fair share of fans over the last couple of years, and is a fine example of the delightful creativity – and borderline insanity – independent productions can introduce us to. Having said that, Sosowski's advice isn't to get out there and make 'fine examples' or hone your 'delightful creativity'. It's to fail. And to fail on purpose. As Sos told **games™**, "Making good games is obviously the right thing to do! But don't forget about all the bad games you can create! Making bad games might not seem satisfying, but it really is, as long as making it bad is your choice and goal! So every once in a while, take a break from making the best game ever, and create something terrible to remind yourself that making games can be fun and rewarding without much effort!"

“DON’T WORRY ABOUT MONEY: UNDERSTAND IT”



JUSTIN MA
SUBSET GAMES

5 AS ONE HALF of the team behind a gem of the Kickstarter gaming boom, Justin Ma knows a lot about the fiscal responsibility that comes with making a game sans big publisher support. Through a crowdfunding platform, Ma and co-designer Matthew Davis – Subset Games in polite company – created the wonderful, brilliant and fantastic *FTL: Faster Than Light*.

So when Ma speaks of understanding how your money will serve you, rather than fretting endlessly, you have to listen. Subset has been doing well since the release of *FTL*, and deservedly so – but it might all have been very different were it not for following straightforward tips like this one:

“Make sure you have a clear understanding of your financial situation and evaluate the risk involved with working as a full time indie developer. Worrying that you won’t be able to eat if your game doesn’t take off won’t help your creativity.”



■ Don’t expect to be the huge success *FTL* was, but at the same time don’t just give up and play *FTL* all day.



“FIVE BRUTAL STEPS TO SUCCESS”



THOMAS GRIP
FRICTIONAL GAMES

4 TRUST THOMAS GRIP of Frictional Games to go against what we expected and make us jump by showering games™ in not just one, but five ‘brutal’ pieces of advice. We should have expected it from one of the minds behind the *Amnesia* and *Penumbra* series. He’s made a career of surprising players, so it *should* be no surprise he surprised us with… wait, this has got convoluted. Here’s Grip’s five points:

1 Do not be more than three people! Even if your game is great, the chances are small that any of your first titles will be a hit (it took us four titles and four years before Frictional got our breakthrough), and you need to be able to survive. Three people can do this on okay sales.

2 Do not have an office unless the cost is close to zero. You want to stay away from any fixed costs as much as possible. You can always live on noodles for a few weeks, but rent is a cost that you’ll have to keep paying regardless.

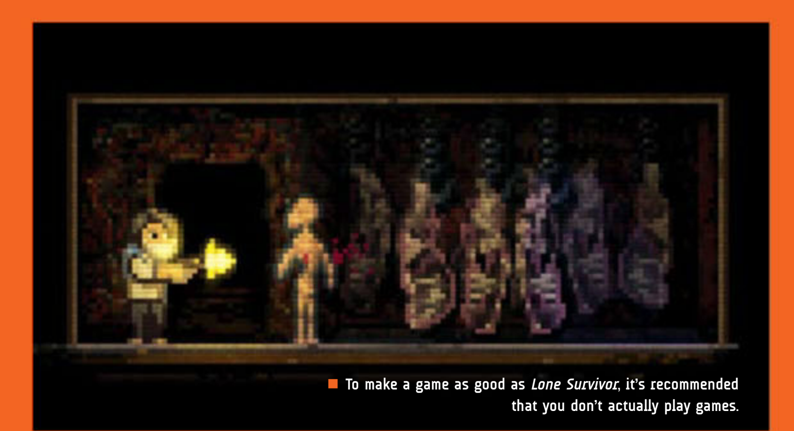
3 Do not spend money on conferences or shows. Put all your money, time and resources on the things that really matter. During Frictional’s first four years, we managed to do all PR with online means and this is even easier today. We actually still do 95% of PR online.

4 You must plan how to do your PR from the very start. Do not think people will be interested in your game because it is good, you need to convince them!

5 Try not to start a family during the first years. Indie development can be gruelling as is without the added burden of supporting and caring for your children.



“GO AND DO ANYTHING BUT GAMES!”



■ To make a game as good as *Lone Survivor*, it’s recommended that you don’t actually play games.

6 HE’S NOT JUST the developer of *Lone Survivor*, but it is the game that Jasper Byrne is best known for. The lo-fi survival horror game struck a chord with a particular section of the gamesplaying public – one that wanted a game that actually followed through on the promises of its genre name, rather than just being a shooter with zombies/zombie-alikes in it.

So it might come as a minor surprise that Byrne’s advice isn’t to go down the purist’s route. It isn’t to make a game to a particular specification, or to tick off the boxes on a form entitled ‘what this genre should feature’. It’s to embrace the world *outside* of gaming and all that it has to offer – because it’s the wider world where real inspiration lies.

“Most of the games I personally enjoy have original ideas and themes inspired by other forms of art, music, sciences, politics, sociology, stamp collecting and so on. In other words: actively seek out and nurture interests outside of the field. Bring something currently outside of games into your work, and help games broaden their palette.”

"DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOUR BODY"


ROBIN HUNICKE
FUNOMENA

7 CURRENTLY A PART of Funomena, Robin Hunicke's biggest credit in the world of indie gaming is one most would give their right arm – and probably left arm too – for: she worked on thatgamecompany's *Journey.* They'd probably also give both their legs too, come to think of it.

But as Hunicke points out, the *journey* (sorry) to a successful indie game can take a toll on your personal health. We all know it's much easier to eat rubbish – and some would argue more delicious – but keeping an eye on your diet will help you keep a better eye on your project, as Hunicke explained:

"Be sure to keep great snacks handy! Don't give in to soda, fatty chips or cloying, mass-produced sweets. Stock dried fruit, granola and nuts, fresh coffee beans and dark chocolate. You are what you eat, and who you are often determines what you make. So be made of delicious, whole, lovely treats. Your game will rock… and what's more, you'll still fit into your pants!"





"MAKE GAMES… AND FRIENDS"


JIM CRAWFORD
TWINBEARD

8 BEFORE WE INTRODUCE Jim Crawford, we'd like you to go and play *Frog Fractions*. Done? Good, now we're all on the same page. 'Indie sensibility' isn't any one thing – it can mean the most derivative man-shooter as much as it means… well, *Frog Fractions*. But Crawford's game can't help but feel like it really grabs hold of the indie sensibility label with both hands. Crawford recommends method, and that method is:

"Make lots of games. Become friends with people who make games and people who write about games. Making lots of games does not guarantee that you will one day make an excellent game, but it is a prerequisite. Good luck!"



"WHATEVER WORKS, AS LONG AS YOU'RE MOVING FORWARD"


PHILIPPE MORIN
RED BARRELS

9 PHILIPPE MORIN IS a co-founder of Red Barrels, which you'd think would mean he's part of a studio churning out first-person shooters where enemies take up residence next to highly explosive containers. Instead, he's part of the team that made the very frightening *Outlast*. Morin's advice is to both say yes and no to opportunities in front of you – as long as it fits in with your aims:

"There are no magical recipes. What works for one company may not apply to another. You have to analyse your options as they come and figure out if they help your situation; if they help move towards your goal."

5 THINGS NOT TO DO

It's the opposite of what you should do

1 COPY CALL OF DUTY

It's the biggest selling franchise in the world and makes more money than most of us can even fathom – so why shouldn't you copy that formula? Well mainly because it already exists, so there's absolutely no point. That is, unless you have a spare few hundred million for things like marketing, years to build up brand loyalty and the focused attention of millions of young people who don't play any other game.

2 MAKE A 500-HOUR EPIC GAME

Rein it in. We all have the grandest of grand ideas in our heads, but the fact of the matter is – unless there's something very curious going on – you simply won't have a large, experienced team. Without that wall of people power, you just won't have enough capacity to make anything other than a lean experience. Note: *No Man's Sky* is the exception to the rule.

3 KICKSTART YOUR VERY FIRST GAME

Never mind the fact that you're likely an unknown quantity, and ignore the fact a number of first-time developers have met their crowdfunding goals. The Kickstarter ship has sailed in the most part, and unless you're asking for a pointlessly small amount of money to cover tiny, almost insignificant costs, there's simply no point in putting yourself through the wringer. At least wait for your second game…

4 ASSUME THE PRESS WILL COVER IT

There are a lot of games. *A lot.* The gaming press, if it had the capacity and time to do so, would cover them all. But it can't. It literally cannot. So when a gaming magazine, or site, or podcast, or video series, or whatever, doesn't cover your game, don't be upset. Don't be annoyed. Don't send pestering or aggressive emails. Please. Polite reminders, of course, are always welcome. Just be prepared for a blunt 'no, sorry'.

5 EXPECT ANYTHING

The minute you start expecting is the minute you begin daydreaming, and once you're caught up in that quagmire of hopefulness, it's pretty much all over for realistic, grounded expectations. Yes, you *might* sell millions of copies and be able to buy your parents/significant other/dog whatever it is they always wanted. But the far more likely story is that simply won't happen. This isn't a call to give up – just to embrace realism. This way you will temper expectations, learn more and be able to suffer through the hard times. Good luck.


It may seem like routine advice (wahey!), but knowing how to actually do what you want to do is a big help.

"HAVE THE SKILLS AS WELL AS IDEAS"


AARON FOSTER
LUNAR SOFTWARE

10 LUNAR SOFTWARE FOUNDER Aaron Foster is currently the project lead on sci-fi horror game *Routine*. He worried his advice might seem 'bitter' when speaking with **games™**, but we assured him it sounds absolutely spot-on. After all, how can you make something if you don't know how to make something? Take it away, Foster:

"'Ideas are a dime a dozen. People who implement them are priceless.' A quote that is extremely relevant when discussing independent game development but one that a lot of students and newcomers to game dev seem to purposely ignore. If you want to give yourself the best possible chance to create your dream game and be successful doing it then you need to get your hands dirty and have a skill set that directly contributes to game content. It's hard work but it is worth it."

"NO, REALLY – HAVE SKILLS AS WELL AS IDEAS"


PETER DISSLER
LUNAR SOFTWARE

11 SIMILARLY, A SECOND quarter of Lunar Software's personnel, Peter Dissler, told **games™** that one of the main issues affecting indie development is having people on a team who can actually do what they say they want to do. We all think we can do things, but can we really *do* them?

"If you aren't qualified enough to make little milk bottles at a studio, you'll really struggle to bring together the art for an entire game. So worry about becoming a good artist or programmer first. Most successful indie titles are made by people with some sort of professional background in their field, whether that is *Minecraft*, *Meat Boy*, *Braid*, *Outlast*, *Ethan Carter* or *Thomas Was Alone*."



"FOCUS ON YOUR STRENGTHS"


JONATAN CRAFOORD
THAT BRAIN

12 WITH CREDITS AT the likes of Grin, Media Molecule, Tarsier Studios and Rovio, Jonatan Crafoord is a solid example of someone who has been through the motions before settling on a more personal project. Crafoord's current studio, That Brain, is working on *20,000 Leagues Above the Clouds*, and with advice like this, surely they can't fail:

"It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that your game needs to have this or that feature in order to be successful. But if you don't have the potential to do a feature well you might as well not do it at all. Whatever your strength is, make sure this is what you centre your game around – put the rest aside for now."



"GET A JOB"


DAN MARSHALL
SIZE FIVE GAMES

13 THIS ISN'T TO say 'get a job' like your angry parents or misunderstanding friends might say (possibly adding the word 'hippy' at the end, in a derogatory sense). No, Dan Marshall of Size Five Games has your best interests at heart – he's a kind gentleman, so much so that even heavy construction equipment severing his internet connection couldn't stop him from getting this slice of fried gold through to **games™**:

"The best bit of advice I can give is to have a full-time job that pays your rent and keeps you fed. When you're starting out, make a couple of blisteringly small projects in evenings and weekends, get your name out there and get some cash coming in. You don't need the stress of making a game and selling it to pay rent all at the same time. When your indie career has taken off, you can let go of your job."

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Reviews

94

FORZA HORIZON 2

Microsoft makes its move to cement its lead in the racing genre in the closest things we've had to Project Gotham Racing in years



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:



@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright



FESTIVAL OF SPEED

Forza Horizon 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Playground Games
PRICE: £59.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Confidence. It's an underrated and under-appreciated part of any artistic endeavour, and particularly hard to pin down in videogame development with its large, faceless teams and multi-faceted production pipelines. But when *Forza Horizon 2* announces itself as a Playground Games 'Event' during its opening credit sequence, you can feel the belief flooding through this studio's fuel-injected veins, and it shows. It shows from the glisten of *Horizon 2*'s vehicles to the shimmer of its setting sun, from the pounding bass of its soundtrack to the meticulous rumble in the Xbox One pad's triggers. It's a confidence that Playground has earned, though.

The original *Forza Horizon* blew in out of nowhere and instantly became one of the very best open-world racing games ever constructed, marrying the sensible physics of Turn 10's revered series with a gorgeous free-roamable Colorado, lifting the best of Criterion's work in this field and cultivating something magical. Here, it's more of the same. The action has moved to Southern Europe – the gorgeous south of France and equally handsome north of Italy, but the concept is maintained – drive gorgeous, high-performance vehicles around incredible landscapes while having the best time of your life. It's underpinned by the fictional Horizon Festival, a kind of Glastonbury for those who worship at the automotive altar, but one where only cool, friendly people are allowed. No sign of the Top Gear team. It's frivolous stuff, really, and could be irritating if it wasn't delivered so affably. The festival is organised by a guy called Ben, a rich English type who by all normal logic should be an egregious prick, but all he ever wants to do is be nice to you and give you amazing cars. In a bizarre twist, he's voiced and acted by Nineties Eastenders heartthrob Sean Maguire. Nice work if you can get it. The Horizon Festival creates a mood that bleeds into every aspect of *Forza Horizon 2*. This is a serious racing game with genuinely best-in-class handling, but it's also a game that's as keen to reward you with XP and Credits when you hit a gnarly drift and smash up a few wheely bins as it does when you come in first place in a race.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SHARP TURNS: The visuals are absolutely stunning at times. 1080p sheen throughout.
DESIGNER TREADS: *Forza*'s full livery design system makes a welcome return.

The sense that you're free to do as you please comes from the very structure of the single-player too. Instead of battling your way through a hierarchy of events, you're just given the simple task of winning 15 race championships, however and whenever you see fit. Every category of cars (Hyper cars, 90s Rally and so on) have their own championships spread out across the world's six regions, and so you can quite literally create your own game in how you tackle them.

If it all sounds a bit too hippyish for a driving game, especially one bearing the *Forza* name, fear not. This is a game for everyone. While it defaults to a fairly mild difficulty with a full racing line, you can adjust every minute facet of your experience and drill down into the kind of detail that has long been synonymous with the name *Forza*. Those who want to play around with their engine, tyre pressure and

THERE'S A DEPTH OF CONTENT HERE THAT MATCHES THE GAME'S UNDOUBTED CLASS

Below: The music selection is excellent, even if it's not the type you'd normally listen to. Radio stations blasting out Balearic house fit the mood perfectly, and each showcase event unlocks a new station, from drum and bass to classical.



Above: As well as freeform driving, certain events pull in specific cars, races and music to create a tailored experience. A drive into the Italian countryside set to classical music is genuinely triumphant.

Left: Cross-country racing can be awkward in supercars, so there's a nice selection of off-road vehicles and old-school rally cars to help you slash through the mud. The old Subaru Impreza is even in there.

BETTER THAN
NEED FOR SPEED RIVALS

AS GOOD AS
FORZA HORIZON

Show off

Punctuating the single-player 'campaign' are five showcase events. The first is similar to events in the first *Forza Horizon*, where you race a point-to-point sprint along a coastal road against the Horizon Festival's equivalent of the Red Arrows. The next has you battling a train across a drift-heavy dirt track. Spoiling the rest would be criminal, but they add life to an otherwise player-driven campaign, and show that Playground has as much of an eye for the spectacular as it does for detail.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS

A glorious 'road trip' to the festival itself in a Lamborghini sets the tone perfectly, and succeeds in showing off the game at its most beautiful and sumptuous.

3 HOURS

By this stage the Horizon Festival is in full swing, you've knocked off a few challenges from the bucket list, and there's a world of online racers waiting for you.

7 DAYS

You've seen every inch of the map and driven countless cars, but the driving physics and gorgeous visuals keep you coming back for more. And more. And more.



downforce can do so to their heart's content, and the relationship between your tweaking and the difference it makes on the road is very noticeable, even when playing on a pad. It can seem overwhelming to those who aren't particularly knowledgeable on the intricacies of car mechanics, but some friendly and unpatronising tutorials gently encourage everyone to experiment. And when you make that adjustment that changes your fortunes from a third-place driver to a championship winner, it's hard not to feel rather pleased with yourself.

And of course, even without diving into the myriad technical options, this is still a game based on the principles of physics and weight. *Forza Horizon 2* has arcade sensibilities, and the car handling is forgiving, but you can feel every topographical shift in the environment, the momentum at the apex of a turn and the loss of traction when flying along at high speeds. Add in the dynamic weather, which looks truly spectacular, and you have a driving model that challenges as often as it delights. One minute you might be speeding through the beachside streets in Nice on a glorious summer's day, but a few miles down the road, you're struggling to keep your car going in a



Drive Club

Much like Sony's own big racer this winter, *Forza Horizon 2* lets you join a car club with your friends. Essentially, this is a clan tag, the kind you'd find in a shooter, but it also feeds back into the game itself. Racing online with your club nets you all bonus XP and Credits, and you compete constantly with other clubs, looking to receive a promotion to a higher tier and generally take on the world. It lacks the asynchronous unlocks that will go on to define *DriveClub*'s more sophisticated ideas, but it still adds a layer of community to *Horizon 2* and makes the world feel more alive and inhabited.

Above: There's something to be said for switching off the racing line and just enjoying the environment in an amazing car. Drivatars can spoil the mood by smashing into you at inopportune moments, but it's still hypnotic.



Left: Bucket List challenges dot the landscape. These let you try out the game's best cars, and ask you

Left: You can even earn XP when you're offline by allowing your Drivatar out into the wild. If it does well in races, you'll get that XP.

Right: Bucket List challenges dot the landscape. These let you try out the game's best cars, and ask you to complete absurd tasks within them.





Left: The car models are absolutely incredible, especially when covered in shiny droplets of rain.

straight line as you're caught in a freak storm in the Italian countryside.

This level of variety and dynamism carries over into the online modes, which are unquestionably *Forza Horizon 2*'s most significant improvement over its predecessor. At any point, you can dive into an Online Free Roam, which will connect you with other drivers instantly and let you continue with whatever you were doing, just in the company of others. Should you choose to team up with a friend, you can do coop challenges, and the party leader will often initiate race events that you can choose to join at your leisure.

If you fancy something a little more structured, though, then there's Online Road Trip. This is the real deal; the true *Horizon* online experience, and one that has been lifted from Criterion's work, refined and retooled to fit the game's mood. An Online Road Trip typically takes in a series of race events, and occasionally an off-the-wall challenge (almost always 'tag' with cars in a closed-off area). The race events function as you'd expect, serving up to 16 players and letting you rent class-appropriate cars if you don't have any in your garage.

Unlike most online racers, though, you all have to drive to the next event; a kind of casual, no-winner race that lets you enjoy the environment with company and without the constraints and tension of a race itself. You earn credits and XP just as you would offline, and even if you don't win you can still rack up plenty of points. Again, it's more about broad enjoyment than hardcore competition, and is a near-perfect way to enjoy an evening with your friends.

Above: The expert use of rumble triggers gives the game a tangible sense of feedback.

FAQs

Q. WHERE IS IT SET?
The south of France and the north of Italy.

Q. BEST CAR?
It's not the fastest, but it's tough to beat an Audi R8.

Q. IS SEAN MAGUIRE IN IT?
Weirdly, inexplicably, he is.

AS IN THE ORIGINAL GAME, YOU CAN QUICKLY CHALLENGE AN AI RACER TO A POINT-TO-POINT RACE ANY TIME YOU COME ACROSS THEM

Online integration still persists when you jump back into the offline game, in the form of *Forza 5*'s controversial Drivatars. Every other racer on the road in an offline game supposedly has the characteristics and driving style of their real-world name, so you'll see friends' gamertags cruising around causing trouble, cutting you off at inopportune moments and occasionally smashing through fences in cars that you can't afford.

How much their behaviour is actually influenced by their cloud-based 'Drivatar' stats is unknown – at times they just feel like AI with a mate's name above them – but there's still substance to be found in battling them in one-on-one competition. As in the original game, you can quickly challenge an AI racer to a point-to-point race any time you come across them, and these are often the most exciting and free-form of *Forza Horizon 2*'s activities.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

INSTANT ON: Connecting to an online game is as easy as pressing a button.
CONNECTED CRUISE: It's less about hardcore racing, more about enjoying the festival with friends.

It's a tough game to criticise. The setting is perhaps not quite as striking as the original game's clay-coated Colorado, but that could be as much to do with the familiarity of the European landscapes for a European reviewer as it is the actual layout of the roads. Perhaps the offline mode could have a little more structure to keep you locked in to its most thrilling events, but that would damage the freeform amiability of everything. It's just a very special racing game. There's a depth of content here that matches the game's undoubted class, and ensures Playground Games is a genuine powerhouse in the world of digital racing. *Forza Horizon 2* is a gorgeous, confident and relentlessly gratifying drive, and easily the best first-party exclusive on Xbox One.

VERDICT 9/10
GORGEOUS, CAPTIVATING AND EXPANSIVE. WORLD-CLASS RACING.

Above: Character models with the FOX Engine look pretty good most of the time, but can occasionally show some signs of strain. The contrast with less well modelled players can also be quite stark as can the difference between official and unofficial kits.

CLOSING IN ON PITCH PERFECTION

PES 2015

There's something a little bolted together about *PES 2015*. Its confluence of polished next-gen gameplay with decade-old trappings can be a little jarring, but there's definitely still something there. Some of that old *PES* magic we've been waiting to see again for so many years is definitely present, but so is the sense that *PES* is still playing catch-up on a generation of advancements in football gaming.

The passing and movement, though, is crisp. That's hopefully the first thing you'll notice as you pick up a pad and start pushing the ball around. PES Productions has been promising that we would be using every inch of the field as we move the ball and that's exactly what has been delivered. The frenetic end-to-end combat of *FIFA 15* is a lot of fun, but the more considered, intricate tactical battle you get to engage with in *PES 2015* is very satisfying. So much so, time seems to move differently when playing *PES*.

You see a typical game of *FIFA* is probably around five or six minutes a half and while on occasion you may find yourself cursing the minutes ticking down, that's usually plenty of time to get away 15 shots and score three goals each. In *PES*, though, five-minute halves whizz by and chances will be limited. The ball just moves around the pitch slower, but don't confuse that with it plodding or getting bogged down. Rather, you just have more time on the ball, more movement ahead and behind you and more options across the pitch. It's actually a refreshing change from the chaos of a *FIFA* match, but then both approaches have their merits. The downside is that nil-nil draws are likely to be common as you build your confidence with the game. Patience is essential.

The sensitivity of the power behind longer passes and crosses is a little much, making it hard to be as pinpoint accurate at a distance,

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: PES Productions
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 13 November
PLAYERS: 1-22
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

THERE'S NOTHING SWEETER THAT SPLITTING A DEFENCE WITH A MODRIC THROUGH BALL

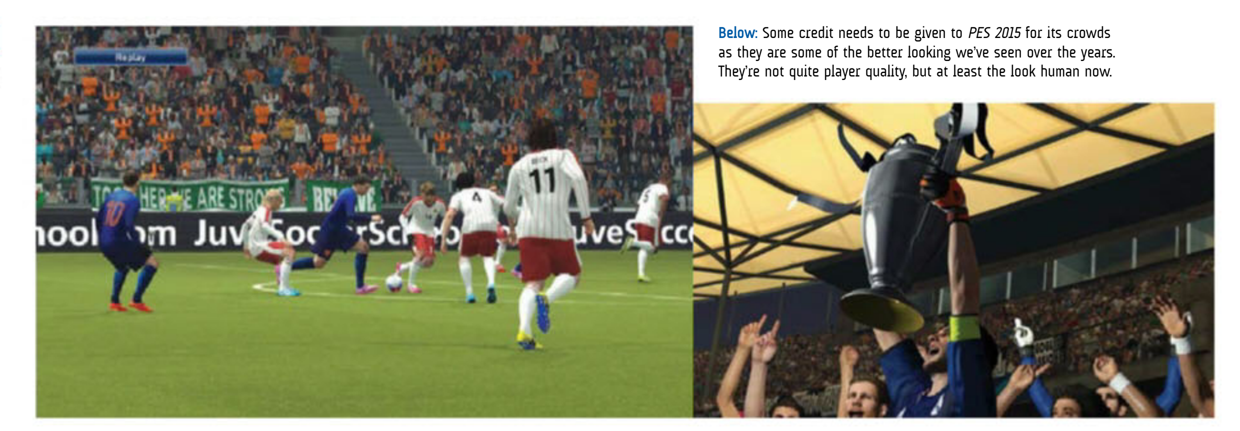


FAQs

Q. IS IT AS GOOD AS PES 6?
While rose-tinted glasses can't be avoided, we'd say this is as close to the classic feel of *PES* as we've seen in years.

Q. IS IT BETTER THAN FIFA?
To be completely blunt, no. But over time you may end up preferring the pace of *PES* this year.

Q. DOES THE FOX ENGINE WORK THIS YEAR?
Definitely. The higher-level players look amazing and move incredibly realistically. It will be good to see that filter down the leagues in the future.



Below: Some credit needs to be given to *PES 2015* for its crowds as they are some of the better looking we've seen over the years. They're not quite player quality, but at least the look human now.

Right: There's some good physicality to players in *PES* again this year, a real benefit to stronger forward players.

Below: Pressure on the opposition box is something that *PES* does very well. Even a cleared corner is still dangerous as the attacking team piles in.



PLAYING AROUND

There are some areas of *PES* that feel a little underbaked or perhaps just not brought up to speed with its more forward looking elements, but that doesn't mean PES Productions has avoided innovating or coming up with odd little idea. Of particular interest is the Role Control gameplay that has three players look after defence, midfield and attack respectively, almost like Foosball. Similarly, we found the training program to be interesting and a great way of picking up on the controls and advancements in the series.

BETTER THAN

PES 2014





WORSE THAN

FIFA 15

but then again, that's simply realistic rather than a shortcoming of the interface. When the quick one-touch passing starts going though you can really zip around the field and unlock a defence. It's a very satisfying experience as you find an opening and take on the keeper.

Which brings us to penalty area and getting yours shots away. Goal scoring and shooting have been imbalanced areas in the last couple of years, with *FIFA* and *PES* both failing to really get things right. They've been too stringent or too easy. Too controlled and assisted or nowhere near assisted enough. *PES* feels about right for the most part. So long as you don't attempt to punt it, the ball will move in exactly the direction you point it in. That may sound like a basic level, obvious gameplay mechanic, but anyone who has been playing football games in recent years knows it hasn't always been the case. Adding a little finesse to the shot is also incredibly satisfying with top-level players and the curl you can achieve is beautiful to watch.

Actually there's and oddly satisfying beauty to the arc and spin of the ball in *PES* that we can only liken to watching some of the great passers of the ball like Pirlo in real life. While midfield playmakers can sometimes feel a little overpowered in *PES*, there's nothing sweeter that splitting a defence with a Modric through ball. It's also kind of fun to find that one-twos are something that works again. Pulling and pushing a defence around just feels right in *PES* this year.

But eventually we have to look beyond the moment-to-moment and those areas of polish and accept there's still much to improve. Sticking with the action on the pitch for the moment, defensive AI remains hit and miss at times and what some of these goalkeepers are thinking is beyond us. Crosses, headers and volleys in particular seem to flummox them. When defending a through ball, *PES* has an awkward habit of locking you to the least helpful defender in your pack. You can hit L1/LB as much as you please, but you'll never get the rightback who is clearly in a better position to shut out the danger under your command.

And while there's much of *PES 2015* that looks superb (character models for Xavi Alonso and Pirlo in particular are amazing), it doesn't always looks as sharp as it could. Quite apart from the lesser players looking pretty ropey next to the big names, the lighting doesn't complement them. It's an area that has clearly seen improvement in terms of casting shadows and creating more realistic visuals, but it's not up to *FIFA* levels yet.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GLOSS AND GLAMOUR: With two football games available this year, both of a high standard on the pitch, the differences in presentation become one of the few things to tell them apart.

There's a similar distance in terms of overall presentation and match-day atmosphere. The menus and interface of *PES* are pretty clunky and impenetrable. The old observation that *FIFA* was a game for football fans and *PES* is a game for gamers perhaps still holds in this respect. Only a player fairly familiar with the idiosyncrasies of video game menu design is likely to work out exactly how to switch controller layout and make sure it sticks. And then there's the commentary, which is rarely something anyone could praise in any videogame, but *PES 2015*'s is particularly poor. Phrases are too often repeated, lines are broken as team names are wedged into different recordings; it's a mess. It's not exactly a game-breaking flaw, but it speaks to a game still evolving rather than being fully formed. *PES* is stronger than it's ever been, but it still has a way to go.

VERDICT 8/10
THE GREAT COMEBACK IS ON, BUT NOT COMPLETE

TIME TO BUY A WII U...

Bayonetta 2

While the Wii U's 12-month headstart might not do much for the console in terms of raw power, it has unquestionably helped the platform get an early lead in terms of killer exclusives. PS4 and Xbox One are only really just starting to see the first real system sellers now, while Nintendo already has *Mario Kart*, *3D World*, *Pikmin 3* and a host of other must-play games.

While it looked like Nintendo might be forced to go it alone and rely on the strength of its first-party releases (which will sound familiar to GameCube fans, we're sure), its decision to fund development of *Bayonetta 2* might just be the smartest business move the company has made in a good few years. It's not going to do *Call Of Duty* numbers, and nobody expects it to. But what *Bayonetta 2* will do is remind the gaming world that there comes a time when, if you want to play the best games in their fields, you simply need to own every platform. For those that might not have much love for Nintendo's dependable little portfolio of in-house classics, that time is now.

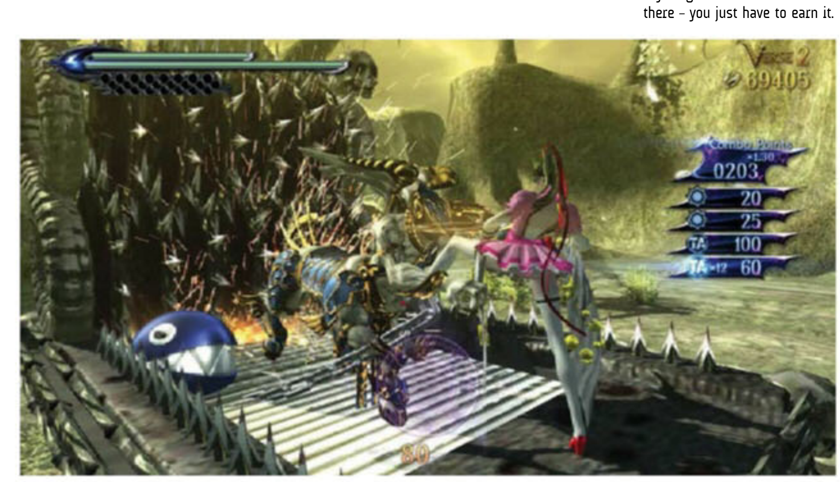
Platinum has barely altered the format of *Bayonetta* at all for this sequel, but to do so would have been lunacy – the original is up there with *DMC3* in the hardcore action hierarchy, a nigh perfect skill-based game. It's one of those rare few games where even though you can't do anything nearly as ridiculous as what happens in the over-the-top cutscenes in regular gameplay, seemingly minor gameplay elements are able to make you feel like even more of a badass.

Watching the witch trade blows with a Lumen Sage in an epic battle is cool, sure, but land a perfect multi-parry or flawless touch of death combo of your own and you'll feel more empowered than pretty much any other game can make you feel. As with its best in breed peers, *Bayonetta 2* is a tool set – canned combos and flashy finishers exist, sure, but it's what you manage to pull off to string them all into one glorious chain of punishment that really makes the combat sing. Whether it's using Dodge Offset to land a powerful combo ender even after evading a blow mid-string or hot-swapping between weapons perfectly to maximise Wicked Weave blows to a boss, every single element of Bayonetta's arsenal has the ability to make you feel like a pro when used properly.

DETAILS

FORMAT: WiiU
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Platinum Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: Yes, that's a Chain Chomp. With its own hideously powerful move set and everything. The fan service is still there – you just have to earn it.



Above: Anyone complaining that the awesome mech is underused didn't play the game properly – there's an accessory that makes it replace Umbran Climax.





Difficulty settings, on the other hand, have been changed up considerably. All the auto-combo nonsense of the original's easier settings has been canned – there's an analogue of sorts in the new touch control scheme but the game just feels more like it's trying to train you up, so the same basic combos you might pick up while testing the water on 1st Climax difficulty will still work the same should you make your way up to Infinite Climax. The original let you mash your way through and still be rewarded whereas here, mashing will get you by but without any of the awesome

Right: You'll need to play on harder difficulties to unlock the cooler stuff, but don't worry – it's a little easier than the first game.

INFINITE CLIMAX IS A GRUELLING DISSERTATION WHERE EVERY FACET OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE GAME WILL BE PUT TO THE TEST





FAQs

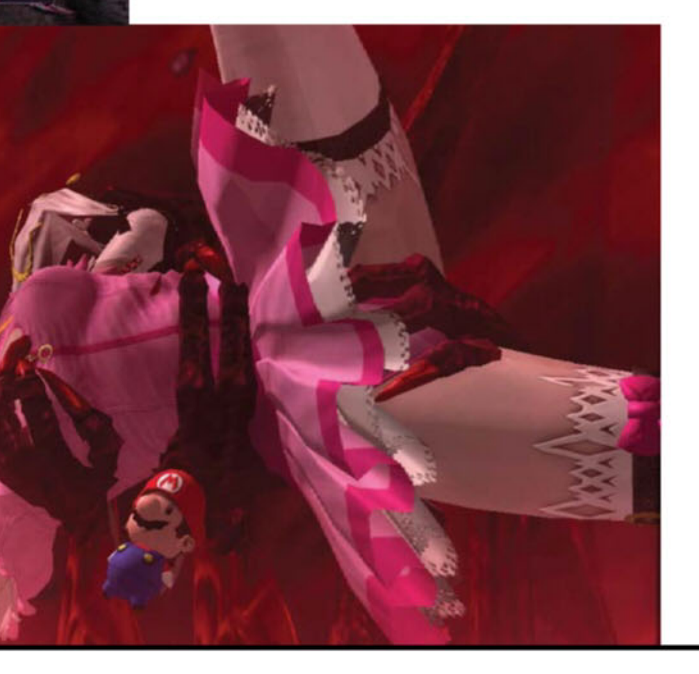
Q. WAIT, TOUCH CONTROLS?
Yeah, but don't use them. Few games demand the precision and accuracy of a controller like this.

Q. EASIER? HARDER?
A little easier, generally speaking – Infinite Climax no longer disables Witch Time, while Third Climax (Hard) is perfectly viable for a first run.

Q. IS IT STILL RIDICULOUS?
Oh yes. It's a veritable Platinum x Nintendo love-in.

RATED M FOR… MARIO?

Veterans will be used to Bayonetta flashing some flesh when using her hair to dish out punishing Wicked Weave attacks rather than clothing herself but for fairly obvious reasons, this isn't the case when you switch to the cosplay outfits. We doubt Nintendo would have approved of a sexy Princess Peach getting half-naked every 30 seconds. It still doesn't change the fact that all the tastelessly gratuitous panty shots of the cutscenes remain, although it at least makes sense that she doesn't need to use her hair in these outfits – the Peach one, for instance, calls in a giant Bowser to pummel enemies in place of the usual hair-based fists and feet, while other costumes offer their own twist on the usual action.



flair that the old Automatic system added on your behalf. Infinite Climax itself has been overhauled too, now allowing use of Witch Time, but you'll absolutely need it – enemies and especially bosses hit ludicrously hard, while levels are populated by waves of ultra-tough angels and demons, many of which you wouldn't normally face until hours later in the game. It always sounds so elitist to claim that a harder difficulty is the way a game is meant to be played but here, it's absolutely the case. Infinite Climax is a gruelling dissertation where every facet of your knowledge of the game – both your abilities and those of your enemies – will be put to the test, and only the best will come out the other side. 'For those who enjoy extremely thrilling battles', reads the flavour text for this ultimate difficulty setting, and it couldn't be more accurate.

QTEs are thankfully gone and while the button-mashing frenzy of Climax attacks still remains, you at least know these are coming having manually triggered them. It's just another sign that Platinum wants to test player skill and creativity rather than simply reaction times – the large dodge window that triggers Witch Time is as gaping as ever, but there are accessories and alternate characters to address this should you want to push yourself even further. The former should be no surprise to fans of the original, where accessories offered game-changing new abilities. But the latter is a pleasant surprise, meaning slapping on a different costume is more than just a cosmetic change – some come with unique weapons and abilities, while others offer completely different ways to play.

Hell, you won't even have access to Bayonetta's entire arsenal without scouring every stage for gold LP pieces, and finding these curious instruments of death is only the first stage – you then have to learn how they work, and adapt your play style around them. Each is considerably different to the basic pistols move set, making experimentation key. A more thorough, fighting game-style training mode might have been nice to offset this, but it's pretty clear that Platinum wants you to learn by doing. Let's just say we wish you all the best in saving up enough Halos for Rodin's most expensive treasures…

Yes, there's some weak voice acting (Loki, we're looking at you), some pretty straightforward level design and a few too many gratuitous pieces of camera work. But mechanically, *Bayonetta 2* steps into the original's heels and somehow looks even better in them. A near-perfect action game, then, and a irrefutable reason to own a Wii U.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TWOSOME TIME: Team up with friends and strangers online in the new Tag Climax mode, wagering Halos on your abilities and increasing difficulty accordingly.


VERDICT 9/10
EVERYTHING YOU COULD WANT FROM A SEQUEL

IS RACING BETTER WITH FRIENDS?

DriveClub

***DriveClub* is immediately striking. From the second the intro video kicks into gear, cars battling violently through tight turns and along desert roads, you know exactly what *DriveClub* is going to be about.** Excitement is the key word here, the physics model set up in such a way so as to allow you to break the rules of vehicular reason and sense. If you're looking for a simulator, move on.

Whether you're in a Bentley or a Mini, the amount of braking required to get your four wheels to the finishing line is minimal when compared to reality and most other games featuring a list of cars pulled from it. Vehicles can be thrown into corners at speeds that defy all odds and, given that everything looks and sounds so real, what is achievable can take some getting used to. You need to leave your perception of car performance at the door. Once you've gotten over that hurdle, however, no lap time seems unattainable.

And yet, an impressive feat has been performed in terms of presenting a vision of faux-reality. Each type of car – front, rear and four-wheel drive – is different enough to force you to learn the quirks associated with handling them, from trying to gently nudge the apex of every corner with one to slamming into turns sideways, wheels screeching, with another. By presenting these different drivetrains in this way *DriveClub* feels more detailed than it otherwise might and offers greater satisfaction as a result.

That's not to say you have to learn the intricacies that comes with each of the official licensed vehicles on offer. Once you've figured out how to drive one four-wheel drive car, you've essentially mastered them all. Ditto rear- and front-wheel drive. It's a design choice that will invariably bore racing veterans already well-versed in such basics, but it imbues *DriveClub* with a level of accessibility that that supreme ruler of PlayStation racers, *Gran Turismo*, doesn't have. Sony, after all, is

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Evolution Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-12 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: The forgiving handling model means that races tend to feature a significant amount of contact and risky overtaking manoeuvres.

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY TRACKS ARE INCLUDED?
There are 55 tracks, 11 for each of the locations - Canada, Scotland, Norway, Chile and India.

Q. CAN CARS BE TUNED OR UPGRADED?
No. The fifty cars on the disc cannot be altered. What you see is exactly, and only, what you get.

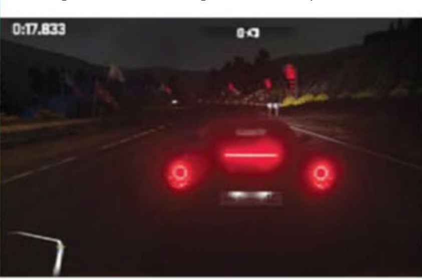
Q. CAN YOU CREATE YOUR OWN PAINT JOBS?
Yes, but options are limited to layering set patterns and colours on top of one another. You cannot create one from scratch.



RECOGNISING AND ACCEPTING YOUR DIFFERENT PROFICIENCIES IS THE KEY TO WINNING CHALLENGES







Left: Part of the reason *DriveClub* is so visually engaging is the detail in each environment. The landscape stretches far beyond the edge of the road, creating a real sense of place.



Left: Powerful cars can be launched into corners with little regard for trackside grass or other obstacles, their engines being powerful enough to provide the acceleration required for a quick recovery. Below: Of the five included regions it's India that offers the most colour. The other four consist of Norway, Canada, Chile and Scotland.



BEHIND THE WHEEL

Unlike the vast majority of racers, *DriveClub* features a cockpit view worth taking advantage of. The camera is placed in a position that allows you to see the majority of the windscreen, which, contrary to common sense, tends not to be the case in most games. As a result, you're given enough information from which to judge braking distances etc. Equally as impressive as the camera position is the level of detail within the cabin. Each car's interior has been individually modelled, meaning everything from the Marussia's video display of its rear-facing camera, to Ferrari's iconic crest on the steering wheel, is included in absorbing detail. Other racing games could learn a lot from the degree of precision on offer here.

not remotely interested in releasing a *Gran Turismo* competitor.

Once you're comfortable behind the wheel, it's time to start undertaking challenges. While the usual set of single player tour events, time trials and multiplayer races exist for you to compete in, the real game here is trying to top the tables across individually crafted challenges. Set a time on a track-based or point-to-point race and you can upload and send it to your friends or the entire community. It's an easy way to boast about how good you are in a certain car and/or on a certain length of road as well as being an effective means of finding new players at your skill level. It's well worth making friends with those players setting times similar to your own as it makes for more meaningful and competitive races in the future, not to mention a chance to improve your game.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SOCIAL COMPETITION: Everything in *DriveClub* is centred around getting involved with the community and challenging yourself against real players. The degree to which pure single-player content is sidelined is a risk that has largely paid off.

Another level of social function comes in the form of 'clubs', a feature of *DriveClub* that is so aggressively encouraged that joining one feels more like a command than an option. Once your perfectly natural resilience to such ferocious promotion has worn off, however, being part of a club is where the long-appeal comes from. Up to six players can join a single club, with everything they do adding to their club's status. One-off events, single player championships and multiplayer races all result in points awarded to your club and, in turn, levelling it up. The 'levelling up' portion is secondary to the club challenges, though, mirroring the experience of playing alone but strengthening it by means of working towards a common goal.

Everyone in your club can enter a club challenge, but only the best score among you is used to judge the whole. It's here that different skill sets theoretically come into play. You might be a wizard in four-wheel drive cars on certain race track, while a club-mate is the king of drifting a rear-wheel drive vehicle through twisting mountain passes and icy roads. Recognising and accepting your different proficiencies is the key to winning challenges as a club.

Taken as individual elements, what is on offer here has been constructed capably and with great care. The challenges are fun, the clubs create bonds between members, the handling is satisfying in a larger-than-life kind of way and the visuals are beyond reproach. Despite that, *DriveClub* fails to hit the highest possible note. Aside from drift challenges, the only way you have of competing with other players is to beat their best times. If this was a pure simulation then there would be nothing wrong with that, but that's not what this is and, as a result, you can't help but feel that there's an ingredient missing.

The handling model means that ridiculous events occur regularly when racing others, sometimes three abreast, around corners whether you're up against the AI or playing online. Rather than embrace this madness by including game modes that promote dirty driving and underhanded tactics, these moments are an annoyance in that they only lead to failure in your quest to set the fastest time possible. It's odd that the on-the-track action can be so boisterous, but at the same time, the ranking system is so conventional in its obsession with shaving tenths of seconds from your times.

It speaks to the strength of the challenge and club systems that *DriveClub* remains wholly enjoyable despite such an omission. A few less serious forms of racing would do a lot to improve to the experience and catapult it into the same realm as the greatest of arcade racers, but what's on offer represents a commendable attempt at changing the way we think about how competition is served in a racing game.



YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel!

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: 2K Australia/Gearbox
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: Greater verticality hurts the game's split-screen multiplayer, where it can be hard to keep track of leaping enemies.

Relinquishing the reins to a popular franchise is never easy for a developer. It's often the case that the new team will fail to grasp what made previous games so good and even if they *do* manage to nail it or even just come close, a new name on a splash screen can be enough to incite the fan base into calling foul regardless. Just look at *DmC* – Ninja Theory did a pretty good job with its own twist on Dante but even so, there are some among the vocal fan base who would rather drink paint than claim to have enjoyed the reboot.

While Gearbox might not be the most trusted of studios after its involvement with *Colonial Marines* and *Duke Nukem Forever*, it has in *Borderlands* a sleeved ace. The original, while a little rough, showed great amounts of potential and the sequel pounced almost perfectly on this, improvements in all areas creating one of the best games of the generation. Judged by the lofty standards of its chronological forerunner and canonical successor, *The Pre-Sequel* can sadly only be seen as a disappointment and a missed opportunity.

With new consoles not at install base sizes where *Borderlands 2*'s success could mathematically be replicated but with interest dwindling in old hardware, the decision to not continue the narrative just yet is a respectable one. In Handsome Jack, Gearbox created a superb villain and one who certainly deserves further screen time.

But a few choice moments aside, the handling of his ascension from Hyperion grunt to lovable sociopath antagonist here is pretty poor. He doesn't even feel like the same character at times (and neither do some of the supporting cast), making this injected arc somewhat hard to follow and even harder to believe. We're not expecting realism here – it's a cel-shaded shooter set in space with bajillions of increasingly stupid guns, for crying out loud – but Jack deserves better.

It doesn't help that 2K Australia's apparent patriotism gets a little much to bear at some points. As an original IP, that wouldn't be a problem. It's not even an issue of culture, but of continuity – with the game pitched as

Below: Beam weapons are great fun and among the fastest ways to layer on elemental damage.



Above: Each class seems to have one skill tree based around stacking effects – recommended for advanced players only.



IT CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL A LITTLE ON THE CLUMSY SIDE IN A POST-DESTINY WORLD



Above: If you played the older games, you'll start off with a nice little loyalty bonus in your inventory.

FREEZE, PUNK

Cryo weapons are one of the big new additions to *Borderlands*' arsenal, something Gearbox boss Randy Pitchford said prior to release that his team had considered before, but never implemented. Now, we think we see why. Overpowered weapons are nothing new in the world of *Borderlands* but when you can freeze even boss enemies solid with just a few shots from the right weapon, you've probably got something of a balance issue. Being on the receiving end is even worse, slowing your movement to the point where death is pretty much inevitable. These weapons are fun to mess around with, but like some other aspects of the game (Nisha's LB special, for instance), you'll want to try and avoid relying on them too heavily as it just feels a bit like cheating.

an interquel (a real word, sadly) between perhaps two of the most American games ever made, it just doesn't work. Oxygen supplies are quickly rebranded as Oz Kits (sorry, science) and constant stereotypes and colloquialisms make it clear that either Pandora's moon is being used as a particularly heavy-handed analog for Australia itself or the team just can't help but put its own flag-waving, canon-bending stamp on the action. Either way, it simply doesn't work in this established universe.

Gunplay, on the other hand, has changed little, which is to say it's still excellent. The game can't help but feel a little on the clumsy side in a post-*Destiny* world, but the random generation of loot and solid FPS mechanics are still enough to keep you coming back for more. New weapon types do just enough to change things up, with lasers coming in all shapes and sizes from pew-pew blasters to crazy beam weapons while the new Cryo element (replacing Slag, which doesn't yet exist in the timeline) lets you freeze enemies solid. This throws the game's balance off somewhat, but other aspects are far worse offenders in this respect.

Low atmosphere areas, while damn cool in theory, are teeming with enemies who exist purely to blast into the sky (or lack thereof) and slam down on you – attempt to

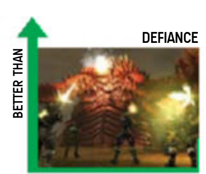
FAQs

Q. MORE GUNS?
You bet. Many will be familiar to those who played *Borderlands 2* but ice and lasers offer plenty of exciting new toys to try out.

Q. IS IT FUNNY?
Not really, sadly. Jack has a few choice lines but most of the new characters are just irritating. Trust Tiny Tina to save the day, though.

Q. WORTH PLAYING?
Sure – it's gonna be ages until *Borderlands 3*, so this fills a gap. The second game's catalogue of DLC is still a better use of your time, though.

BETTER THAN



DEFIANCE

WORSE THAN



BORDERLANDS 2

track them and grounded foes will rinse you but ignore them and there's a slam attack coming your way. You can (and should) abuse this slam attack yourself, but many new enemy types appear to be able to stay above ground indefinitely and air-to-air combat is a risky business.

Well, we say 'many' but in truth, there really aren't that many enemy types in total – pretty much the first half of the game is spent fighting the same group of space bandits and there's nothing like the variety that the second game offered in terms of alien life to blow to bits in search of shinier guns. The moon in general lacks the variety of the planet below, which is to be expected, sure, but it falls on the developer to find clever ways to address this inherent issue with the setting it has chosen. And the best they can really come up with is a knock-off of the second game's wildlife park and an assortment of takes on enemies from the last two games.

The Pre-Sequel is far from a bad game, rather one that does little to further the franchise. Content-wise, the argument that it isn't just a filler game holds water – it's a good 20-hour slog through the moon and its surroundings just to hit True Vault Hunter mode where things pick up a little. Here, Tina's interruptions and interjections on core narrative points hark back to the brilliance of *Borderlands 2*'s final DLC episode and while they never quite live up to that Bunkers And Badasses glory, it's at least a hint that those involved do know what people liked about the previous games after all.

Four interesting new Vault Hunters and a metric shit-ton of new loot are reason enough for existing fans to get involved, but the fact that the team uses fingers and thumbs rather than corks and concrete to fill the gaps in the story means that *The Pre-Sequel!* is never truly satisfying on the one level that could have made it stand out as a last-gen must-play.

We expect good gunplay and loot from a *Borderlands* game, and we still got that with *The Pre-Sequel*. But by expecting a little more, we seem to have set ourselves up for disappointment. Strewth.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BORDERWORLDS: The moon/space station offer nothing like the kind of diversity in *Borderlands 2*.
TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES: Paint the world with colourful explosions and the frame rate goes to hell.

VERDICT 6/10

THROW A PROPER SEQUEL ON THE BARBIE, SPORT

HOW TO REMAKE RESIDENT EVIL WITHOUT ANYONE NOTICING

The Evil Within

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER: Tango Gameworks
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

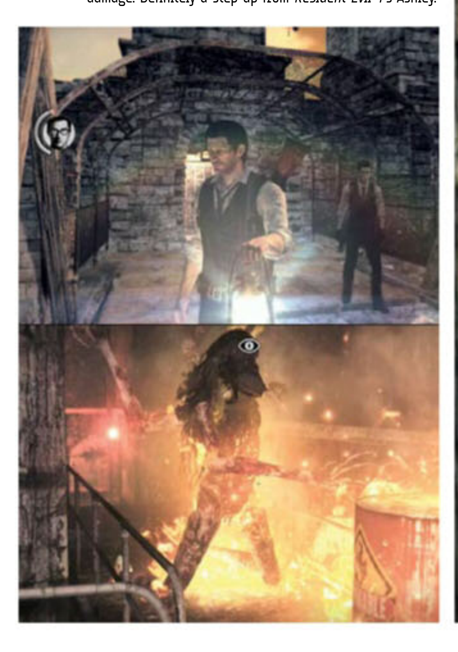
It's hard to tell whether legendary survival horror game designer Shinji Mikami has intentionally overloaded his return to the genre with numerous allusions to his iconic work on *Resident Evil*, or if the director has simply run out of new ideas. Either way, *The Evil Within* represents the best of Mikami; an all-encompassing tour de force of abject horror, familiar tropes, contorted creatures and recognisable gameplay mechanics that have graced the developer's resume over the years, presented here with enough verve and panache to suggest he's lost none of his skill in constructing a chilling gaming experience. But what appears to have vacated is his ferocious talent to innovate.

Not one single frame of *The Evil Within* will surprise you. That's a problem, not just for a horror game in general, but for a title that purports to reinvent the genre courtesy of the man that was fundamental in its genesis. Instead, it's a series of also-ran scenarios presented with impeccable precision and underpinned by a mechanical slickness. To say that we didn't have fun traipsing through a dilapidated foreign-feeling villages and clandestine laboratories dispatching plagued humans would be a lie, but this is Mikami on autopilot, reeling off one repurposed image after another. A chainsaw-wielding brute, the palpable discomfort of a fixed camera angle, and that ridiculously overpowered punch that caves in an enemy's head like a rotten grapefruit. By the time protagonist Sebastian Castellanos steps inside an enigmatic mansion, exclaiming, "This looks familiar" we knew the feeling all too well.

Furthermore, Mikami seems to have lost his grasp of pacing. The opening hours of *The Evil Within* move at a sluggish crawl, dragging players through turgid dialogue and uninventive setpieces that provide few thrills and even fewer scares. We're introduced to Castellanos, a police detective who is called to a mental hospital to investigate a series of murders. But once he arrives he soon finds reality twisted and himself teleported into a nightmare world populated by multi-limbed spider-women trying to bash his face in, and heavy-set gentlemen with their heads stuck inside safe boxes.

Right: The framing of the screen gives *The Evil Within* a great cinematic aesthetic and it's intentionally limiting to amp up the tension.

Below: In several chapters of the game you'll find yourself with an AI partner tagging along. They're pretty good at clearing the room of enemies without taking a huge amount of damage. Definitely a step up from *Resident Evil 4*'s Ashley.



Above: You'll find that your explosive equipment is much more effective against the larger enemies you come across in the game.

Below: There's an indicator at the top of the screen letting you know whether you've alerted enemies in your area. The stealth mechanics are pretty tight.



MUCH ONUS IS PLACED ON SURVIVAL AND THE EVIL WITHIN EXCELS WHEN PLACING PLAYERS IN FRAUGHT SCENARIOS



Above: You'll encounter bear traps and proximity mines on your travels. The game is littered with traps, but most of them can be disarmed and used for parts to create bolts for your compound bow.



A BURNING ISSUE

One of the most interesting mechanics in *The Evil Within* that really serves the central themes is also one of the game's simplest: matches. As long as you've got a constant supply, you're able to burn corpses that you come across and light environmental traps to catch enemies off guard. But it also feeds into the sense of fear and paranoia that is established so well throughout the game. You've only got a limited amount of matches, and they're most useful in a heavy combat scenario when you can shoot an enemy in the leg to down it and then go in for an immolation kill. However, the consistency with which you'll find unconscious bodies lying on the floor will have your match-trigger itching to make sure everyone already down stays there.

Castellanos is a dull lead whose inability to react to the strange happenings around him undermines the horror, and his few allies fail to do better in engaging the audience in their doom-laden surroundings. The original *Resident Evil* compensated the banalities of its vanilla characters and woeful voice acting with a series of hilariously clunky dialogue exchanges, but this is just po-faced tedium stretched across a dozen hours of so-so plotting, dutifully cryptic and entirely predictable writing.

However, what's interesting about the narrative is that MIkami pursues a story that revolves around psychological horror, something much more akin to *Silent Hill* than *Resident Evil*. While this doesn't do much to elevate the storytelling, it does offer Mikami his most abstract canvas on which to paint (using red, mostly), handing the developer the tools to crank the tension in ways that weren't previously available to him. Rooms throb and transform into hellish dreamscapes around you, while inanimate objects become terrifyingly giant death traps. It allows for plenty of jump scares too, but for the majority of the time *The Evil Within* relies on gore as a tool to shock and intimidate players.

This element can be cheap. The rusting corridors of various science facilities are stacked with various deathly contraptions that can flatten, impale or roast your hero, and you'll find yourself dying plenty in some ignominious fashion due to their nature. But part of the fun of *The Evil Within* is discovering what devilish traps have been set and how to utilise the environment to get the upper hand on the ghoulish enemies that populate the vicinity.

Much onus is placed on survival and *The Evil Within* excels when it's placing players in fraught scenarios. As is mandatory, there's scarce ammunition to the weapons on offer and there's a robust stealth system in place to make it possible to get through some encounters without raising suspicion. But then there's the action: it's hugely tense and utterly unnerving stuff. Often you're trapped within some narrow pathway or cramped space, repelling an attack by several undead using what limited resources you have at your disposal. You'll find that most weapons have a specific function for different scenarios and enemies, while you can pick up a few different types of items for a more powerful melee attack. Also, Castellanos demonstrates a vulnerability uncommon in the horror genre. If he takes a few too many hits he'll limp away, unable to run to safety, while elsewhere his aim becomes unsteady, making it hard to accurately line up headshots.

Most of this makes up the core *The Evil Within* experience. It's an exhaustive test of nerve against an unrelenting foe that escalates into more horrifying forms as you progress. More importantly, it's fun. Sure, puzzle solving is rudimentary, but when it comes down to combat, there's a graceful balance of resource management and punchy action to get you through. As you wander into more dangerous territory, you'll embrace the thrill of discovering a new monster and working out how best to defeat it using the sublime selection of tools at hand.

The Evil Within isn't a return to the genre's roots or a reinvention, but an exercise in reliving its greatest hits. It's disappointing that Mikami has lost the wind behind his sails and there seems to be genuine creative apathy here. Nonetheless, *The Evil Within* is an enjoyable horror romp. It's a shame it couldn't be more.

FAQs

Q. IS IT SCARY?
It's more chilling overall than scary. In truth, we found many of the scares to be cliché and predictable.

Q. SCARIEST BIT?
The sight of the spider-like woman chasing you down a corridor is likely to get your heart racing.

Q. IS IT A RESI CLONE?
In some respects. There's certainly a lot of familiar elements and noticeable references to Mikami's past work.

BETTER THAN — RESIDENT EVIL 6



WORSE THAN — RESIDENT EVIL 4

MISSING LINK

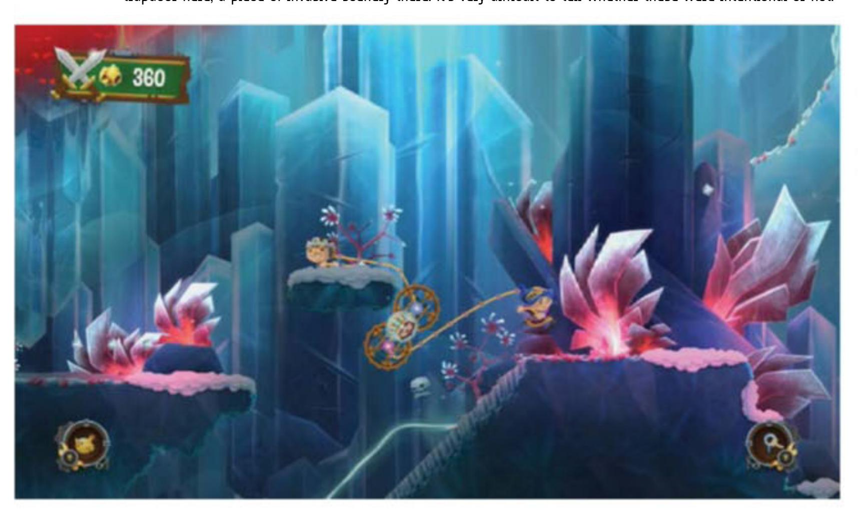
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

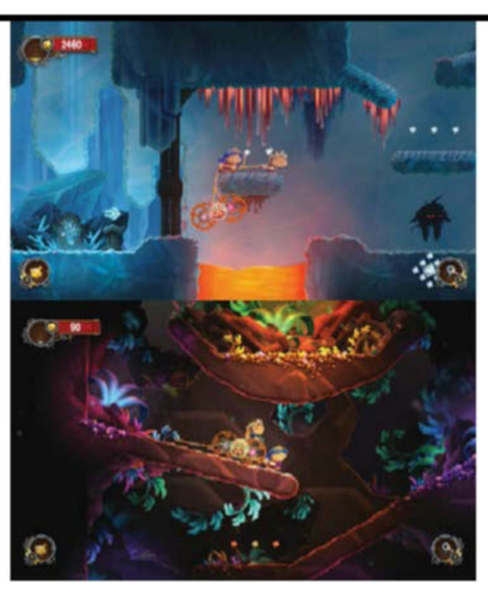
LOCK-ON: One little complaint we have is the lack of lock-on when it comes to melee attacks. It's easy to miss targets completely as you swing wildly trying to hit something.

VERDICT 7/10

LACKING IN AMBITION BUT CREEPY FUN NONETHELESS

Below: There are far too many moments in which your only option to proceed is through suicide: a broken trapdoor here, a piece of invasive scenery there. It's very difficult to tell whether these were intentional or not.





Above: The decision to include combat is a bit of a mysterious one. Periodically fighting off looters involves mashing a single button, a process made doubly tedious in single-player because enemies can get caught *in* the coffin's mid-section.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Playstation 4, PC, Wii U
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Frima Studio
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out Now (Wii U and PC in November)
PLAYERS: 1-2

BETTER THAN

CRIMSON DRAGON





SUPER TIME FORCE

WORSE THAN

THERE'S NOTHING SWEET ABOUT IT

Chariot

As delightful and cunning as so much of *Chariot*'s design manifestly is, the game's tedious insistence on outmoded, strenuous difficulty slowly but surely becomes its undoing. Initially a truly joyous exploration of how to successfully move a two-wheeled coffin around a series of treacherous caves, before long you rarely do anything other than progress upwards; meaning that the tiniest slip can (and does) result in an incomparably discouraging loss of progress.

It's also deceptive. The first few levels aren't so much a relaxed gateway as a complete anomaly; the small areas, leg-ups and emphasis on jubilant speed all disappear before you reach the end of Level 1-3. After that, you're gauging blind leaps of faith in complete darkness (never before have a game's suggested brightness settings been better ignored), trying to maintain your balance on blocks of very erratic ice and slowly progressing through levels that take nearly a full hour to complete.

Despite its simple conceit though, *Chariot*'s complexity is mostly welcome. Sometimes the freewheeling sarcophagus you're pushing and pulling around is a pendulum, used to fling you (and your co-op partner) to safety. Sometimes it's a runaway train for you to hitch a ride on. Very occasionally, it's a roller coaster or a battering ram. The game is at its very best when it's relentlessly shifting gears; the ebb and flow serving to both keep things engaging, and give you a meaningful sense of momentum that's sorely absent from the rest of it.

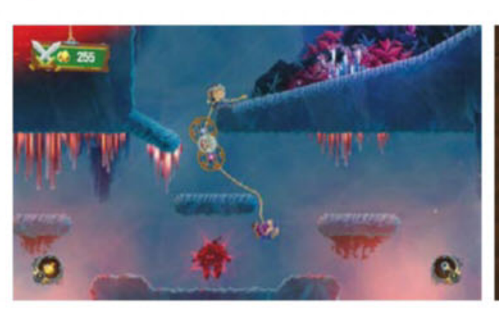
The macabre plot, which has you carting a dead monarch around while he fussily selects his final resting place, is preposterous and silly but never twee. That said, it is a truly upbeat individual who isn't exasperated when the king "amusingly" mocks the oft-complicated (and needlessly long-winded) structure of some of the levels. One aspect of *Chariot* that's worth praising very highly indeed is that it does work both on your own and in local co-op. The complicated physics and labyrinthine maps feel like they were built expressly for co-op, but if you're very dedicated, it makes for a slower, more pensive but equally rewarding experience alone... if you can cope with the near-ceaseless punishment, obviously.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PERFECT PHYSICS: The physics of the titular chariot really are stunning. They're affected by everything from the tautness and length of your rope, to the proximity of your co-op partner while onboard.

Difficulty aside, another significant problem is that the game's camera is an inexplicable blockhead. When you're rushing through mazes at high speed – to ensure that the chariot doesn't outrun you in another part of the level – it's supremely aggravating when one of you stumbles and falls, because the camera always opts to follow that player instead of the one attempting to continue playing. *Chariot* is harsh, good looking and only really an option for people who have a lot of spare time on their hands. The number of people who reach its climax is all set to be record-breakingly slender.







VERDICT 6/10
BEAUTIFULLY DESIGNED BUT UNDULY BRUTAL

ACTIVISION SPRINGS ITS TRAP WITH PARTIAL SUCCESS

Skylanders: Trap Team

In four short years, Activision and Toys For Bob have created an unstoppable juggernaut of a franchise that shows no sign of slowing. Like the Lego games and the best Pixar films, Toys For Bob realises that creating something for the younger generation doesn't necessarily mean you have to dumb it down. You might scoff at the daft-looking figures and the gimmicky nature of its premise, but there's no denying the impact that *Skylanders* has had in such a short time frame. While it's inevitable that the bubble will burst, if Toys For Bob keeps creating titles of *Trap Team*'s quality, Activision won't have to worry about its bottom line any time soon.

Trap Team is fun. It might not have the best designed levels from the series and the game's base mechanics haven't noticeably improved, but there's no denying that running around as an anthropomorphic, hat-wearing crocodile is a great laugh. *Skylanders: Trap Team* may appear sickly sweet with its cheery-looking protagonists and sugar-coated environments, but it hides a surprisingly dark core that makes for a challengingly tough game at times. Put it this way – if you're a newcomer to the franchise, you may find yourself wishing that you'd bought a few additional figures to supplement your base set.

Regardless of whether you're a casual observer or a hardcore fan, the first thing you will notice is that this is the first game in the series to not feature three playable characters straight out of the box. While it's easy to cynically suggest that it's simply a case of Activision turning the screws and gouging you for a little extra cash, you soon discover that the introduction of traps actually makes for a far more expansive game than before.

Everyone loves rooting for a good villain and *Trap Team* introduces a whole host of them. Rocket-firing sheep and animated sticks of walking broccoli are just a few of the 40+ mayors that can be trapped, while even long-running uber-villain Kaos can be ensnared, providing that you have the relevant trap. Defeat a villain and if you have a suitable elemental trap you'll be able to ensnare them forever, ready to use them at a moment's

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Android, Fire OS, iOS, Nintendo 3DS, PlayStation 3, Wii, Wii U, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: United States
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Toys For Bob
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

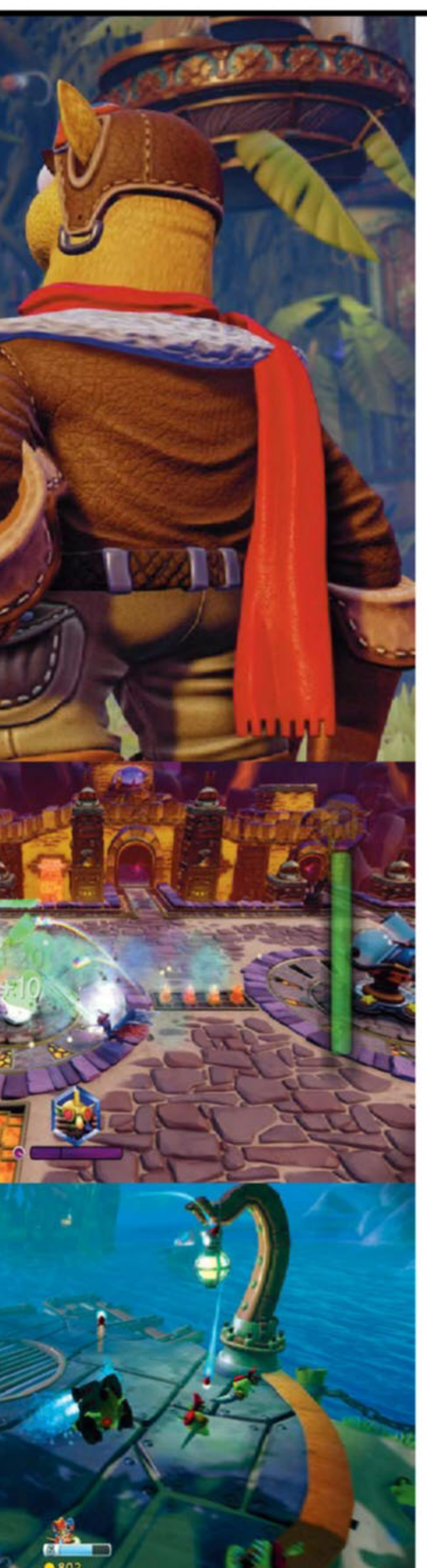


Above: The strong voice cast really adds to the appeal of *Trap Team*. Regular favourites, such as Tara Strong and Patrick Warburton, return, while the numerous villains are brought to life with surprising vigour. It's a pity the main Skylanders aren't given the same attention.
Right: One of the biggest downsides of *Skylanders: Trap Team* is that the original Skylanders are far weaker than their Trap Master equivalents, taking more damage and dealing out less of their own. It's almost as if Activision wants you to buy more new toys...



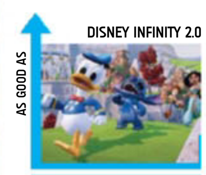
GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL

One of the most enjoyable aspects of *Trap Team* is Skylander's Smash, a tile-based game that nicely breaks up all the frantic scrapping. Each player takes it in turns to play a tile, which will then attack the tile next to it at the end of each round, or immediately attack your opponent if nothing is placed in its way. Tiles can dish out and receive a certain amount of damage before being destroyed, while captured bosses will typically have stronger abilities that will immediately turn the current round in your favour. It's a solid successor to Skystones (last seen in *Skylanders Giants*) and gives you another reason to continue playing long after the main game has finished.



AS GOOD AS

DISNEY INFINITY 2.0



WORSE THAN



DIABLO III

FAQs

Q. BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY?
Yes. You can use all of your original Skylanders in *Trap Force*, but sadly new figures won't work in previous games.

Q. BETTER THAN INFINITY?
While the core game is arguably much better than Disney's playsets, they are two very different experiences.

Q. ARE HATS STILL IN?
You bet, and you can further dress up your Skylanders with the addition of various trinkets that offer new abilities

notice. The gimmick here however is that the new Traptanium Portal – that's right kids, your old starter portals are no good here – also hosts a speaker, allowing your newly acquired foe to chatter away and throw out numerous quips as the adventure progresses.

It works surprisingly well, giving each bad guy a personality that the silent Skylanders just don't possess. Less impressive is the way villains are actually used in-game. Summon one to help you and it comes out on a timer, with enemy hits quickly reducing said bar. It puts a restriction on the game, and while it doesn't take too long to charge back up, you'll find yourself impatiently swapping between traps. It won't be surprising to learn that many of the better villains aren't possible to ensnare in your starter traps, meaning Activision has found another way to part you from your cash.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WHO SAID THAT? The disembodied voices that emit from the Traptanium Portal add greatly to the game, making it sound like the villains have been ripped from your TV.

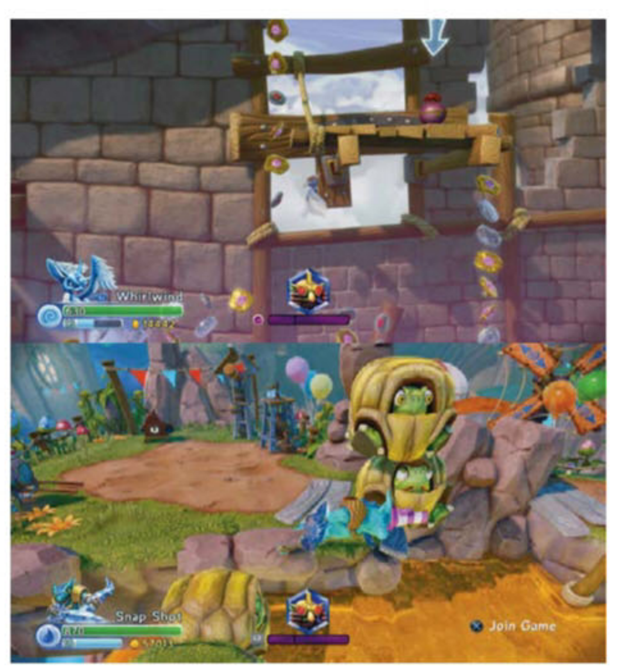
While we're on the subject of pricing, the portal system feels a little unfair this time around. As with past games in the series, a number of portals are strewn around the levels, requiring Skylanders of certain elements to open them. Previously, you could use any existing figures, giving purpose to your old toys, but this time around only the new Trap Masters can unlock these secret areas. While said locations don't hide significant goodies, it will still grate those who have an incessant need to mop up everything the game has to offer.

Pricing model aside, there's no denying that there is plenty of game here for your money, with an 18-chapter story mode that will take a good ten hours to complete. The story itself is as twee as they come and sees Kaos unleashing the occupants of Cloudcracker Prison who must be recaptured by the Trap Masters. The plot may be throwaway, but it's considerably bolstered by the strong voice cast.

While the voice cast continues to dazzle, the base game starts to feel a little tired in places. Last year's *Swap Force* made significant attempts to stray away from the *Diablo*-like gameplay the series has become known for, so it's disappointing to see the original creators unwilling to push this template in new directions. It's still enjoyable, but the level design feels far simpler than before, while the smaller skill trees of each available Skylander, suggesting that Toys For Bob is more interested in emptying your wallet than developing your characters. Skylanders simply don't seem to have as many useful attacks as in past games, although the addition of each unique and entertaining villain does go some way to make up for this.

SKYLANDERS: TRAP TEAM MAY APPEAR SICKLY SWEET, BUT IT HIDES A SURPRISINGLY DARK CORE THAT MAKES FOR A TOUGH GAME AT TIMES

As well as the main story mode, *Trap Team* offers longevity in the form of a large number of redeeming quests for each villain, a silly amount of Arena battles that will put even the toughest *Skylander* veterans through their paces and the epic Kaos Doom Challenge. Part horde mode, part tower defence, it features 100 waves across nine different locations that proves that Activision's franchise is not just for kids. An enjoyable adventure, but it's really starting to show signs of fatigue.



Above: Puzzles continue to play a part in *Trap Team*, but many of them are ridiculously easy, with only some of the later lock traps offering any true challenge.
Left: Villains are extremely powerful compared to their Trap Master equivalents, greatly turning the tide in the numerous boss battles you'll encounter. They're also extremely varied.

VERDICT 7/10
A FUN GAME THAT'S WEARING A LITTLE THIN

LAST-GEN RACER IN LAST PLACE

F1 2014

For 2014, Formula One has seen some of the most radical technological changes ever implemented in the sport. Gone are the screaming 2.4-litre V8s, instead replaced by warbling 1.5-litre turbocharged V6s. Downforce has been reduced, with an increased eye on fuel efficiency and energy recovering. Incredibly though, Codemasters' annual, officially licenced, virtual recreation of the F1 season feels remarkably unchanged to the offerings of previous years.

Graphically, there is also not much visual difference between *F1 2014* and its predecessor 12 months ago. Yes, all the new cars are there (the Williams resplendent in its Martini livery) and the two new tracks – Austria and Russia – have been added to the circuit roster but these simply make sure the kits are up to date. Even the in-game menus are incredibly similar, with the screens and animations from inside the garage familiar not just from last year's game but from previous instalments too. There is nothing visually that will make you 'Ooh' like a five-year-old at a fireworks display.

Handling-wise, real-life F1 cars have become more difficult to drive this year thanks to a reduction in downforce levels. Coupled with the brutal kick from the turbocharged engines and *F1 2014* should be providing virtual racers with one of their toughest challenges yet. Unfortunately, Codemasters' focus on accessibility is to the detriment of loyal franchise fans with the end result a handling model that feels benign and lifeless. Without their edginess on the limit, the cars are much easier to drive, making the game easier but much less rewarding. What's more, the new engine sounds, while replicated well under acceleration, are much too quiet on the downshifts, causing you to often lose track of your gear changes as you slow down.

Career mode now lasts for five years and, unlike previous *F1* games, doesn't require you to start with a lesser team and work your way up. Each car has its own attributes, with the Red Bull and Mercedes supposedly better than the Caterham and Marussia. This is a nice shift away from the gameplay model that pigeonholed some racers into a style that didn't suit but it isn't a sole reason to buy *F1 2014*. Nor is the expanded Scenario mode, where there are now more generic challenges to complete.

While EA Sports manages to make each edition of *FIFA* different enough to warrant purchasing, Codemasters has so far failed to produce the same game-changing qualities in its *F1* series. With the popular Legends mode (where you could race numerous classic Formula One cars) making way so that Codemasters could focus on developing the new handling model, you would expect better from *F1 2014*. Instead, there a few improvements over last year, making this a title solely for those who really want to relive the 2014 F1 season.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3/PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters Racing
DEVELOPER: Codemasters Birmingham
PRICE: £37.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

GTI CLUB SUPERMINI FESTA!



WORSE THAN



F1 2013



Below: The game has everything a fan of the F1 2014 season could want, but that's about it. With a lack of revolutionary content Codemasters won't be bringing in new fans to the franchise.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE: This is the first racing game to feature the new Sochi Autodrom, a track around the Winter Olympic park.

TURBO BOOST: The real-life return of turbocharged Formula One engines is recreated in *F1 2014*.

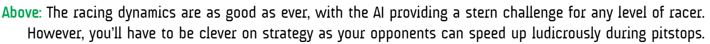



VERDICT 5/10

NOT A BAD RACER, BUT A REVOLUTION IS NEEDED







Above: The racing dynamics are as good as ever, with the AI providing a stern challenge for any level of racer. However, you'll have to be clever on strategy as your opponents can speed up ludicrously during pitstops.

PULLS THROUGH IN THE FOURTH QUARTER...

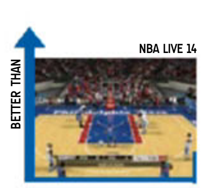
NBA 2K15

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K SPORTS
DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: OUT NOW
PLAYERS: 1-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

NBA LIVE 14





NBA 2K13

WORSE THAN

The opening moments of *NBA 2K15* are a mess. In large part this is due to the awful menus that, while better than last year's game, continue to make it difficult to perform the most perfunctory of tasks – such as playing online or taking to the court for quick matches against friends. More frustrating, however, is the player creation option that you're immediately thrown into, which is one of the most irritating and bloated yet seen in a sports game. Particularly painful is the option to use the PlayStation Camera to scan your face onto your future NBA star, the process taking an age to complete thanks a constant break down in head tracking. This can be skipped, but with MyCareer being the game's leading mode, many of us want our digital alter ego to be as representative as possible.

Should you have the patience to sit through this nightmare of design, one that completely ignores the rules of what constitutes a quality initial user experience, you're rewarded with a joyous interpretation of the sport. When on the hardwood it's easy to forget about the perils that await you when you eventually return to the menus, with every bounce, pass, shot, block and dunk oozing style and grace. In terms of recreating on screen what you expect to see from a TV broadcast, *NBA 2K15* represents the pinnacle of sports games.

Particularly impressive this year are improvements made to the AI, making playing with the equivalent difficulty settings as last season a tougher challenge. Defenders are much more intelligent when it comes to positioning themselves to disrupt passing lanes, while offensive players wriggle and dance their way through your own barriers to create space. Anyone without a fundamental understanding of core basketball tactics will struggle in their first few matches, but some decent tutorials (hidden away in the menus) provide a solid foundation to build upon. If you're not familiar with past *NBA 2K* games it's essential that you indulge in these practises, particularly if you're planning to invest time in the exhaustive, dynasty-building MyGM mode. The sheer number of games and off-the-court options means time is wasted in confusion if you're not up to scratch on your pick and rolls and transitional offences.

No matter how realistic the AI is, nothing can match beating human opposition. Offline play is especially satisfying as you can taunt your foe face-to-face. *NBA 2K15*'s ability to present its source material with flair continues to make other sports games feel impotent. Just make sure you've done your homework before you step out on the court.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MENU MADNESS: They might be better than last season, but a complete rethink of the menu system is still required. Too many core options are hidden behind multiple layers of boxes, making the task of jumping into simple games painful.



Above: Great teams of the past, and mediocre present day European outfits, are included, expanding potential for highlight reel showdowns. Magic Johnson taking to the court opposite Michael Jordan will induce goosebumps.





Above: MyCareer features a surprising number of cutscenes, primarily involving your created player interacting with his agent and team managers.

VERDICT 8/10

DESPITE PRESENTATION ISSUES, A SPORTS ESSENTIAL



Left: Hitting the 180 degree turn button at just the right time is the key to shaving seconds off your time and building the perfect run. And if it all gets a little too much, you can just listen to the hypnotic soundtrack.

FLIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

Futuridium EP Deluxe

If you were a kid that grew up with the original *Star Wars* movies, we'd wager that at some stage you fantasised about flying around in an X-Wing. The Rebel Alliance's flagship star-fighter is the one-person wrecking-ball that took out the Death Star; that moment when Luke Skywalker nails the trench run is the stuff of cinema legend. It's also the kind of intergalactic nostalgia that *Futuridium* personifies.

Developed by a small indie team from Italy, *Futuridium* is a puzzle game that likes to keep things simple. You pilot an angular spaceship that looks like a classic 2D arcade sprite that's been forced into three dimensions. The game is made up of 50 levels that lock you to a forward trajectory as you strafe run capital ships of varying shapes and sizes. The objective is to destroy all the blue cubes that are scattered across the capital ship's exterior. Knock them all out with your rapid firing laser and you'll expose a powercube that'll propel you towards the next level.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
ORIGIN: PS4
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: MixedBag Srl
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS
GRAVITY CRASH ULTRA



WORSE THAN
RESOGUN

To call *Futuridium* a tricky game would be an understatement. Most players will be able to wing it through the opening levels on their first attempt, but once the game starts throwing in missile turrets and fiendish bosses, death is all but certain. The game quickly becomes a test of skill and memory as each unsuccessful attempt leads you closer to the perfect run. It's hard going to begin with – especially when learning the layout of a new level – but each victory feels all the more satisfying once start using the turbo boost and 180 degree spin in perfect harmony. It's all about building momentum.

There's also a hint of Psygnosis in how the game fuses a neon palette and breakneck speed with a synth-heavy soundtrack. We have no idea who "le dégout" is but their hypnotic audio helps keep the player fixated on the task at hand.

SYNTHESIS

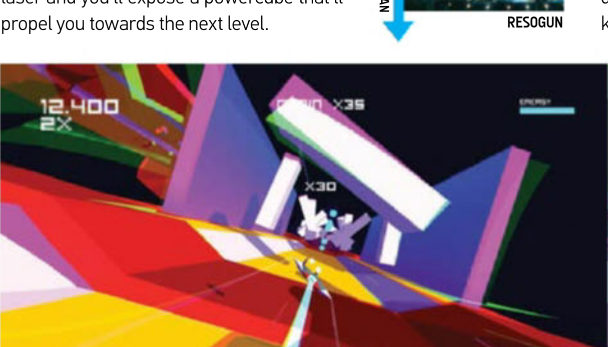
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

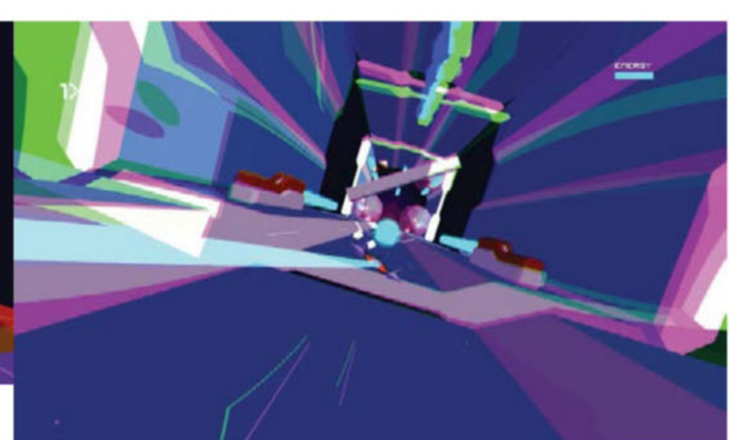
SHOOT THE CORE: You may pilot a spaceship that's armed with laser cannons but at its heart, *Futuridium* is a puzzle game. It's all about shooting all the cubes in the quickest time possible.

It's less of a Red Five frame of mind and more *Tetris*-style tunnel vision that forces you to keep the blinks to a minimum. It's just a shame, then, that *Futuridium* feels a tad dear for what if offers.

Compared to the free version that's still available on PC and Mac, *Futuridium EP Deluxe* adds more music, enemies and modes for a less one-dimensional experience. But unless you really buy into the score building mechanic and have a real passion for dubstep, the extra content doesn't really justify the steep price tag. That doesn't stop *Futuridium* from being a fun puzzle game with shoot 'em up sensibilities, but we wouldn't be surprised if it finds itself on PlayStation Plus in a few months' time.

VERDICT 7/10
OLDSCHOOL IN LOOKS AND DIFFICULTY





Above: *Futuridium*'s retro aesthetic is a good match for the portable screen. It all runs at 60fps and conveys a convincing sense of terminal velocity when you hit the turbo button.

EARTH'S MIGHTIEST TOYS-TO-LIFE FRANCHISE

Disney Infinity 2.0: Marvel Super Heroes

Marvel's current dominance over the worldwide box office is not only down to the insane popularity of its series of iconic superheroes, but also in how successfully each film executes a unique and tonally diverse perspective on the same interconnected universe. While the original *Disney Infinity* shared the same values, it failed to allow its players to explore the potential that the game had to offer.

Luckily that's the one area that Avalanche Studios has focused on in the sequel that adds the likes of Iron Man, Captain America, Groot and Spider-Man to the litany of Disney mascots. Here, *Disney Infinity 2.0* improves the original's greatest asset – the Toy Box, *Infinity*'s creation tool that throws together its entire array of characters, locations and items and lets players create their own inimitable adventures starring their favourite characters. The creation tools were undercooked, however; a series of complex systems that meant you'd only end up creating rudimentary playpens or identikit cityscapes rather than letting its core audience (kids, duh) find an accessible alternative to the Mojang's *Minecraft* and the likes of *LittleBigPlanet*.

Toy Box 2.0 (as Disney calls it) brings about enough significant change to address most of the problems that plagued the original, the most noteworthy of which is the addition of automated building tools. Rather than having to rely solely on your own imagination and deft hand, there are options available to build the world of your choosing without having to go through the rigmarole of the involved labour. This is down to the builders and templates. Builders are NPC, based on existing characters within the Disney/Marvel universe that can design specific settings based on their native brand. For instance, if you find *Wall-E*'s Eve floating around, she can automatically throw together a forest terrain for you. Creators, on the other hand, essentially involve dropping a block on the ground, choosing a theme and letting an environment be procedurally generated for you. Templates more-or-less function the same, except they create minigames.

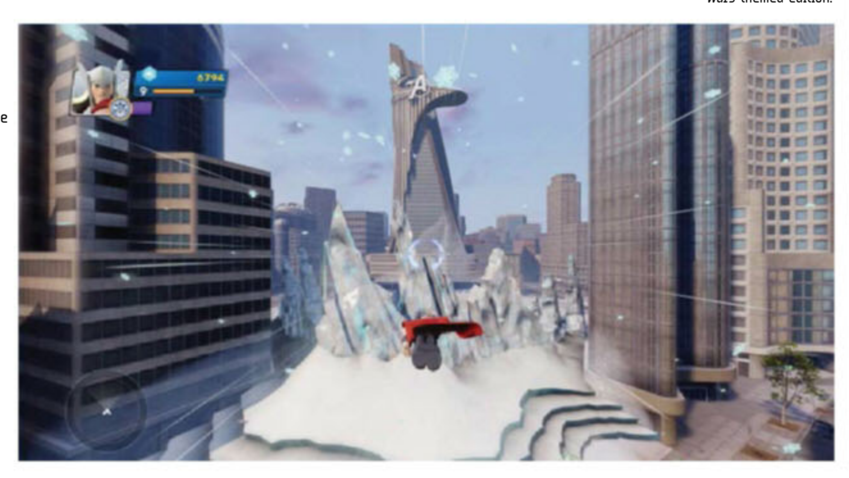
Of course, there is always the option to get hands-on and completely craft your own experience, and much has been done to make this advanced option more streamlined. From being able to choose where to spend Sparks (in-game currency) to the ability to create interior levels, there's a huge variety and depth here that represents a massive leap from what existed previously.

This is fortunate, given that for all its work expanding and refining the Toy Box mode into something far more robust and, crucially, enjoyable, Avalanche has scaled down the single-player campaign where it almost comes across as an afterthought. Whereas the original *Disney Infinity* featured three play sets based on a trio of differing Disney brands, the sequel only features one. This wouldn't

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: Multi
PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive
DEVELOPER: Avalanche Software
PRICE: £54.00
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: There isn't much Disney can do wrong with its *Skylanders*-alike. We predict that next year will be a *Star Wars*-themed edition.



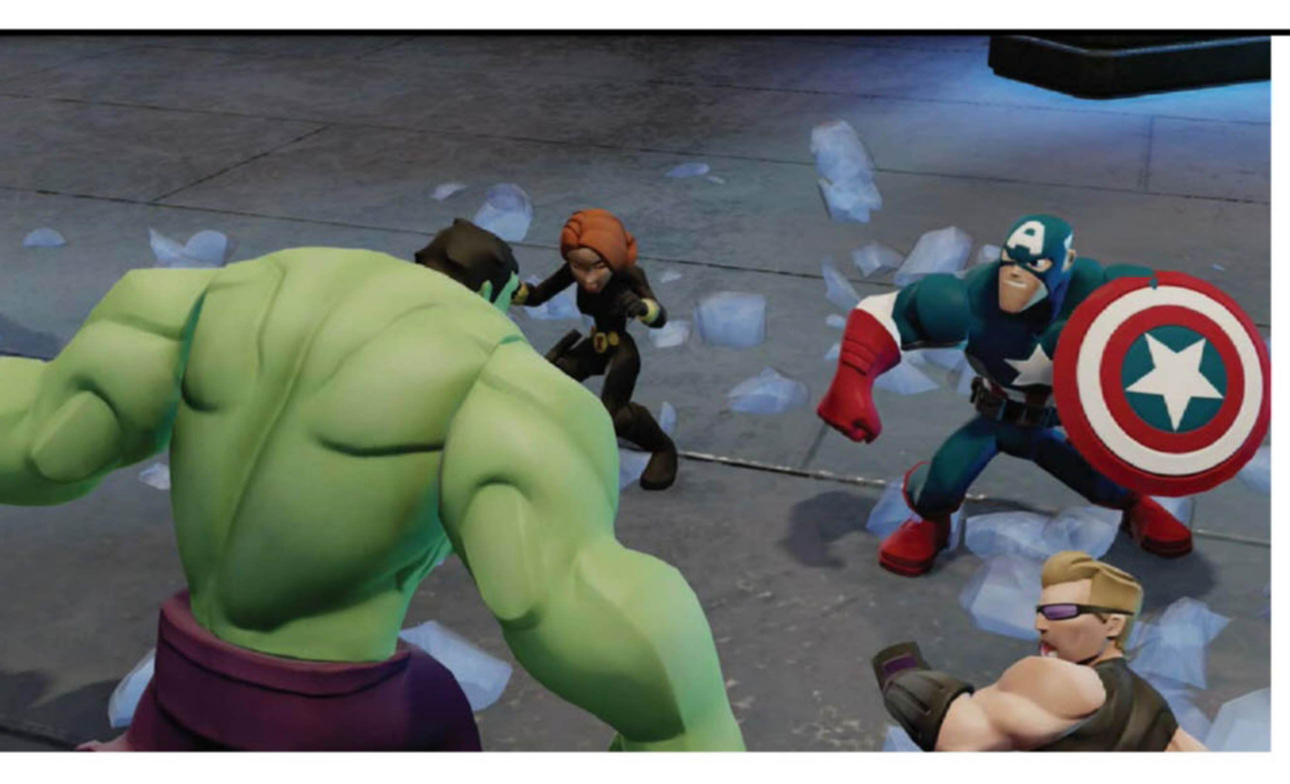
Above: We predict that the disappointing single-player campaign will receive a frosty reception.
Below: While Black Widow doesn't have the power of flight, a range of vehicles enable her to navigate through the skies and streets.

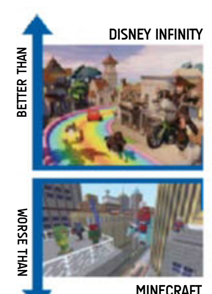




Above: How many other games let you have Thor race Jack Skellington on a race track made from chocolate?
Right: The game provides a wealth of new characters, including Thor and Iron Man.

TOY BOX 2.0 BRINGS ABOUT ENOUGH SIGNIFICANT CHANGE TO ADDRESS MOST OF THE PROBLEMS THAT PLAGUED THE ORIGINAL





FAQs

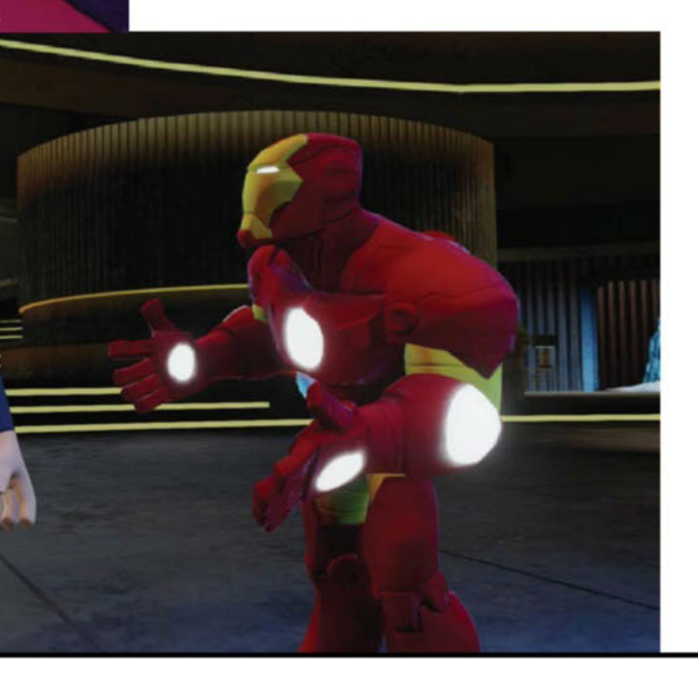
Q. HOW ARE THE FIGURES?
Once again they're at a high quality. However, younger players might try to bend them, which is a big no-no.

Q. WHO'S THE BEST?
Out of the starter pack, we opted for Iron Man, whose flight and canons made him an obvious winner above all others.

Q. AND THE WORST?
Black Widow. Unfortunately, given that she's the only character not to have super-powers, her range of abilities are rather limited.

COMBAT EVOLVED

One of the biggest improvements to the core mechanics is combat. Much of the game's action comes down to punching and shooting Marvel bad guys and there's a focus on creating deeper systems with combos and skill trees to offer more than just button bashing. Surprisingly, the new system has been created by Ninja Theory, who has seen to it that there's much more personalisation when it comes to creating the type of fighter you want to be. Ultimately, each figurine in your possession can be sculpted into a unique warrior, featuring custom movesets and special abilities that you've designated during your progress through the game.



necessarily represent a problem, particularly given that the starter pack bests the original as its three figurines – Iron Man, Thor and Black Widow – are all compatible, making multiplayer possible straight out of the box. However, not only is the campaign criminally limited, but it's a repetitive exercise that simply fails to deliver anything bordering on fun.

As one of the three Avengers, you're plopped into Manhattan as grand mischief maker Loki unleashes a Frost Giant army on the Big Apple. The entire ordeal is just stuffed with uninventive set-pieces and a slog of fetch and escort quests that barely scratch the surface potential of what *Disney Infinity 2.0* has to offer.

However, what this does offer is an opportunity to get acquainted with some of the sequel's new systems. Combat has been overhauled to much success, which ties into the new skill trees that represent not only a major upgrade, but a more mature approach to the core gameplay in general – after all, there's not much else to do other than punch and blast things. These can radically alter how a specific character can behave in a fight, with super-moves, boosts and new abilities unlocked as you rank up to level 20. What's more, all of the characters in the original *Disney Infinity* have been upgraded to fit the new skills trees, meaning your old figurines will have more to do here.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SINGLE MINDED: While much has been done to make the Toy Box more robust, single-player has basically been ignored. A compelling campaign with more variety would make *Infinity* the ultimate package.

You're able to earn experience in the disappointing single-player campaign, but wisely it's not limited to that one subsection of the game's suite of features. You're also able to level up in the Toy Box worlds you create, separately sold campaigns and the minigames that are pre-loaded on physical tokens (two coming free with the starter pack).

The latter tokens are a particular highlight. One is an isometric action game, while the other is a third-person tower defence experience – both of which offer bitesize chunks of gameplay that make use of the licenses and characters better than the campaign. What's more, both were built using the creation tools provided with the Toy Box – a positive declaration of the game's potential.

It's here, in the Toy Box, that *Disney Infinity 2.0* thrives. The game suffers from a few technical hiccups in frame rates and broken quests, but there's a wealth of content here waiting to be unleashed by your own imagination. On the surface it looks like *Infinity 2.0* is offering less (with its one play set compared to last year's three), but the truth is the opposite. With a focus on improving the creativity tools matched with a wider selection of characters and settings, there's more game here to sink your teeth into.

VERDICT 7/10
A PROMISING ADVANCE TO LAST YEAR'S *SKYLANDERS*-ALIKE

THE IMAGINATION STATION

Project Spark

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, Windows 8
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Team Dakota
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

UNREAL ENGINE 3





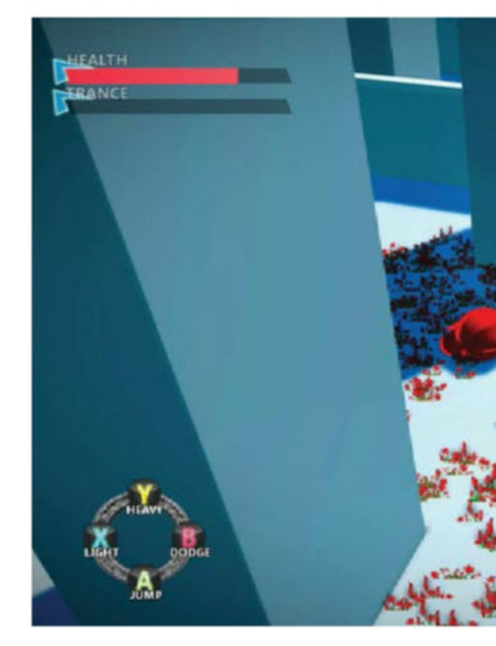
LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

WORSE THAN

At what point does complexity turn into a positive? We're always clamouring for more depth to our games, but simultaneously praise simplicity and accessibility when it manages to smooth out that uneven learning curve. That's the overriding complaint of *Project Spark*, the create-a-game game from Team Dakota and Microsoft for Xbox, tablet and PC. And much like *LittleBigPlanet* before it, *Project Spark*'s standout feature is its unlimited creative scope, an endless sea of imagination and potential – which certainly sounds like something *LBP* narrator Stephen Fry might spout. But first, let's talk business.

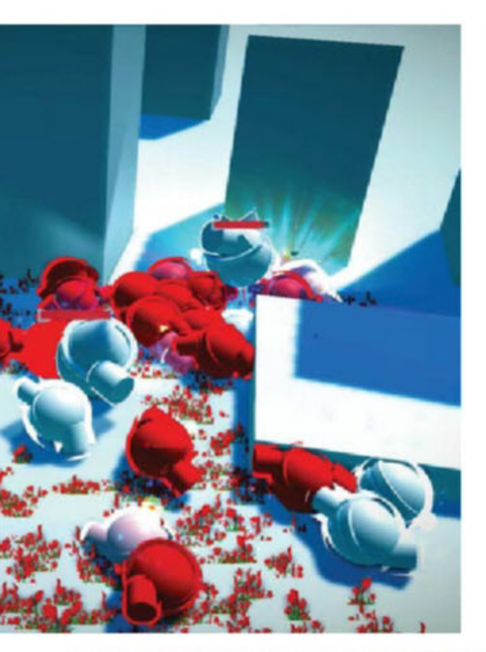
Though it is free to download and use the tools available, if you're at all interested in the creation aspect you're going to want to pick up the Starter Pack that adds a host of creation options, a month of Spark Premium, a playable character and the Void Storm campaign content. DLC will be released at a steady rate, too, some free but much of it unlocked through purchases, either via real world or in-game currency. Scoff if you will at its free-to-play model, but it's one that can work wonders for such a creatively fulfilling game like this. Premium Membership will be a must for the truly hardcore Sparkers, though, since it'll unlock the option to purchase DLC packs with in-game Credits and provide additional level upload slots alongside boosts to XP and Credit gains. It's unnecessarily convoluted, but a model worthy of praise since it'll maintain *Project Spark*'s survival for those who don't have the time, inclination or desire to use the game for anything other that playing the clever creations of the community. And that, ultimately, is where it will thrive.

The Void Storm content you'll get access to as part of the Starter Pack, however, sets a horrible precedent. Acting as a loose story mode of sorts, it'll introduce a number of core concepts of *Project Spark* but not really to a competent degree. It explains the ideas of 'Kode' – or the intricate tiles you'll use to issue commands and controls for your game – and presents



Above: The levels that impress the most are the ones that manage to distinguish themselves completely from the game that they're built on.

Below: Team Dakota's own shared creations are, in fact, better than the levels they've created for the Void Storm campaign. It makes you wonder why it didn't just use these as lessons.



FAQs

Q. SO NO STORY CONTENT?
Not really, no. There's the Void Storm stuff (and more to be added later) but it's not worth playing, not really.

Q. MULTIPLAYER?
It's a system built for that kind of play but, aside from a handful of levels we played, there aren't really many people making use of it.

Q. RUINED BY MICROTRANSACTIONS?
It's actually a better system since it will keep the game ticking along, but with such a huge barrier to entry it could limit the potential creators willing to pay.



The ignition to remix

The saving grace of *Project Spark*'s complicated create mode is that any level – be it created by Team Dakota or a user – can be 'remixed'. Or, in other words, you can load it up within the game's edit functions, poke around in the level itself and even alter it as your own. There are systems in place to prevent complete plagiarism, so there's not really any reason to change another user's level – but it is great for figuring out how they've achieved a particularly impressive feat. The fact that reverse engineering greatness is the best way to learn says a lot about *Project Spark*, perhaps, but it's a great feature all the same.

PROJECT SPARK COULD COLLAPSE WITHOUT A MORE ROBUST CURATION SYSTEM TO HIGHLIGHT THE CREATIONS THAT NEED PLAYING

scenarios you'll be able to build yourself using the very basic tools. Yet even ignoring its failure to actually *teach* you anything, this mode is still poorly presented. Flimsy combat and controls, juddering frame rates and a lack of variety makes this section… well, embarrassing. With this being seen as the entry point, it really shouldn't struggle as it does to highlight any of the game's potential – whether in its promise of creativity or core mechanical and technical design. It just feels *rough*.

Of course the real core of *Project Spark* is in its Create mode, and there is a separate tutorial for this too. Sadly it does little more than explain the controls of the feature, and not really the intricacies of that hidden complexity. Truth be told anyone will be able to hop in and create a stage with relative ease here; the controls, though initially clunky, are sufficient and there are options available to have much of the process automated if you prefer. But these levels will be little more than slivers of the potential that *Project Spark* embodies, and disappointingly for many that will all it ever ends up being.

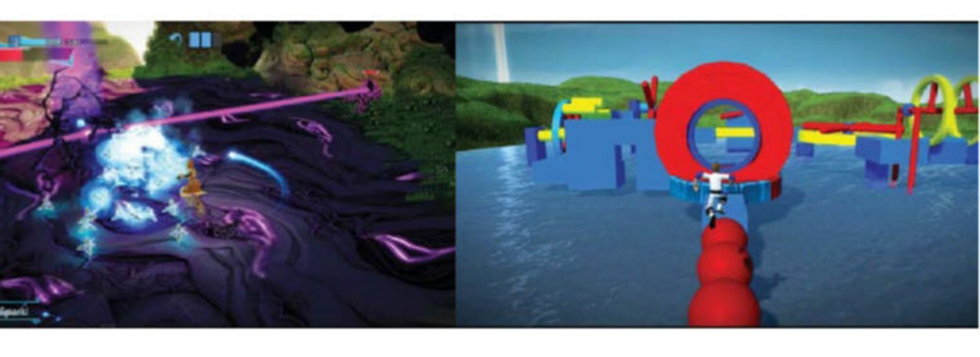
See, *Project Spark*'s entire creation system – or, at least, the parts that let you create your own *games* rather than levels – are pinned on understanding the Kode system. Here you'll alter an object's 'brain', or the AI, mechanical or visual elements that control how your game plays. It's how you alter control schemes, cameras or even the way your character moves, but it's not nearly simple enough. Even locking a camera in place is obtuse and requires a great deal of learning about variables and axises and all that jargon that comes with real game design. Though *LittleBigPlanet* and its sequel matched *Project Spark*'s initial barrier to entry, here it's just a little too much like studying. The tape-and-string nature of *LittleBigPlanet* meant there was at least a visual logic to its creation aspect that you could easily follow – even the complicated stuff of *LBP2*. *Project Spark* on the other hand, with no in-built tutorials beyond the initial one and a sorely lacking reference or example function, will take a lot more work if you truly want to make the most of it.

Of course with this greater sense of complexity comes an even greater sense of reward; spend time outside of the game watching YouTube tutorials, reading wikis and engrossing yourself in the community already available then you'll spend endless amounts of hours in *Project Spark*. But very few will be willing to put in all that hard graft – and it can't be considered anything but – meaning a lot of *Project Spark*'s value relies on those that are. Yet it doesn't cost anything to download and play the games people have created, and that's important to remember; it's a perfect piece of software to leave installed on your Xbox One to return to periodically.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BRIGHT SPARKS: The game will survive so long as there are creators willing to prove how capable it is. While it's potentially capable of being fascinating, we worry that might not be enough.

Project Spark is one of those rare situations where you're only rewarded if – and absolutely, only, completely *if* – you're willing to put the effort in. The creation community is already the lynchpin around which the game's longevity rests, but its incredibly steep learning curve means that only a tiny fragment of players are going to find much value in this side of the software. *Project Spark* could collapse without a more robust and manageable curation system to highlight the creations that need playing, too, and it truly doesn't share that immediately compelling cutesy appeal of Sony's *LittleBigPlanet*. Where the original advocate of play, create and share really succeeded was in the quality of its three equal parts – not one more insignificant nor any less accessible than the other. There are far more doubts surrounding *Project Spark* in this regard: a barely existent 'Play', an adequate but improvable 'Share' and a complex but completely incomprehensible 'Create'. Time will tell on this one.



VERDICT 7/10
BRIMMING WITH POTENTIAL, BUT LACKS PROPER TUTORIALS

EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIES

Sid Meier's Civilization: Beyond Earth

Right: Combat remains predicated as much on positioning as it does on individual unit strength, with veterancy simplified and unique abilities instead tied to affinity bonuses.

The most valuable insight gleaned by the human race has come at the hands of its toughest lessons. The desire to push boundaries and expand horizons has been met with great tragedies and stunning discoveries alike. It's fitting, then, that the same can be said of Firaxis' latest title in its long-running *Civilization* series, in which you'll learn as much from unlocking the secrets of Transgenics as you will from falling foul of a Xeno Titan.

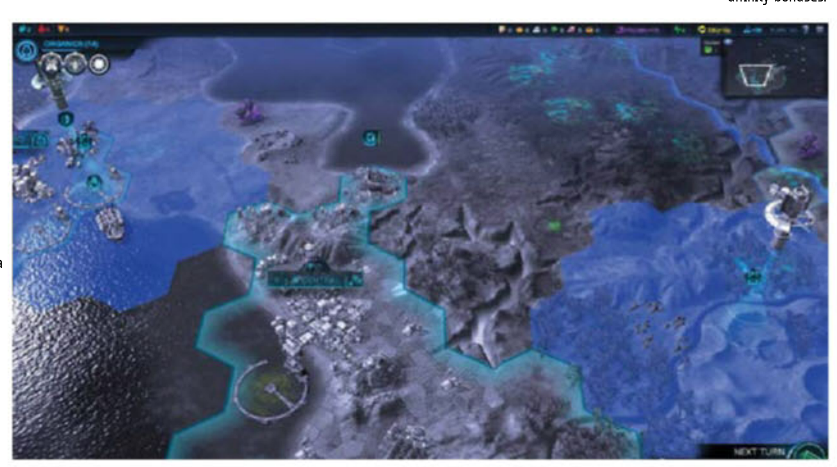
At its heart, *Beyond Earth* features the same basic premise as past *Civ* games. Pick a starting spot to establish your civilisation, cultivate local resources and, in time, spread across the region to found new strongholds and bases of operations. However, instead of starting at the dawn of human civilisation with a few units armed with crude clubs, here you begin life in 2600AD attempting to establish life on a new planet after mankind's folly has left Earth on the brink of ruin. Marauding barbarians and animal husbandry give way to sea-dragons and inter-species ethics, as you struggle to establish a brave new world, either for the betterment of humankind or your own gain.

For new players, tentatively approaching a *Civilization* title for the first time, *Beyond Earth* features the same, well-established show-not-tell tutorial style as its predecessors. Lessons are best learned through action and the more you play, the more you come to understand its nuances and how decisions taken early on can become important determining factors in the end-game. Any one of the five victory conditions is as attractive and viable as the others and, crucially, you are rarely punished for changing tack partway through the game. Instead, you're rewarded for maximising the benefits of interlocking technologies, cultural virtues and canny diplomacy as you start to grasp how best to formulate a long-term winning strategy.

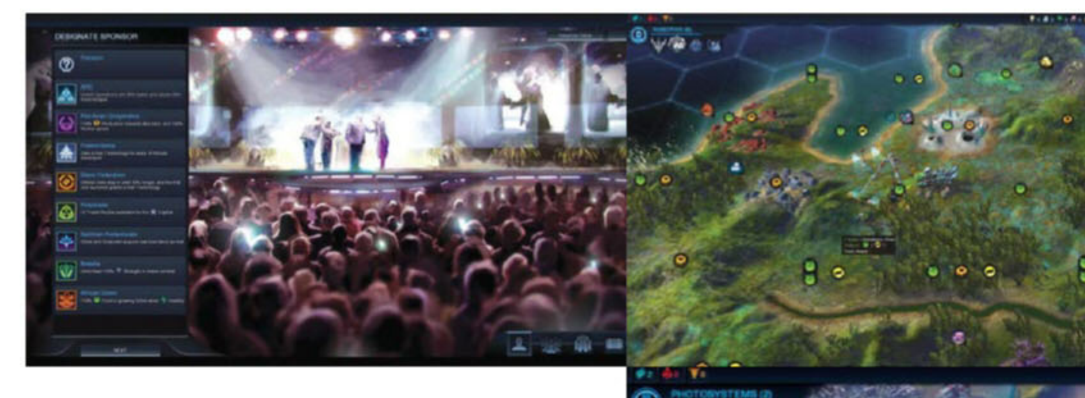
While *Beyond Earth* seems as though it should pick up at the point that many a game of *Civilization V* ends, looks can be deceiving. We may have mastered interstellar travel but it's still going to take ten turns to cut down a forest and three turns to build a road and so the early time-sinks that occupied your workers in 4000BC are the very same that will be keeping them busy some six thousand years later. This is indicative of the fact that *Beyond Earth* is, in many ways, a game of parallels and alternatives rather than a new set of gameplay systems.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Firaxis Games
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-8
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows Vista SP2/Windows 7, Intel Core Duo 1.8 GHz/AMD Athlon X2 64 2.0 GHz, 2 GB RAM, 256 MB ATI HD3650/256 MB nVidia 8800 GT/Intel HD 3000 or better, DirectX v11, 8 GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: The Orbital Layer provides a visual overview of the satellites at your disposal. Clearing miasma, gathering resources and defending territory can be performed by these units, which last for a specific duration before crashing to earth to be salvaged for parts.



There are many familiar concepts here, including units, tile improvements, wonders, culture benefits, hexagon yields and, of course, those irrepressibly unreasonable rival leaders. Happiness quotas give way to health considerations and covert operations are encouraged from early on but *Civ* veterans will find themselves at home amongst the neon floatstones and domesticated chitins. That said, the foundation relied upon here has long been part of the *Civilization* bedrock for many years so forms the basis of a very strong and well balanced strategy title.

Above: The larger than life leaders of previous games give way to a combination of Sponsor, Colonist and Cargo bonuses.
Right: Resources are plentiful and varied, with many revealed early on despite not being useful until later. This gives you the opportunity to plan your expansion on how it best suits your long-term goals.

WHAT INITIALLY APPEAR TO BE COUNTERINTUITIVE CHANGES GRANT GREATER FLEXIBILITY WITH HOW YOU USE WHAT REMAINS



WORSE THAN

XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN



AS GOOD AS

AGE OF WONDERS 3

FAQs

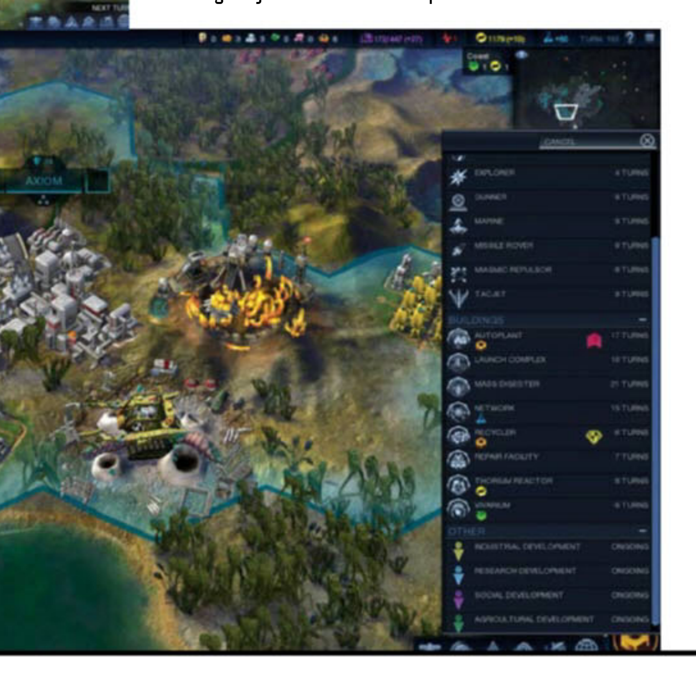
Q. WHAT'S THE FUTURE LIKE?
The same, but different. Many of the differences are aesthetic but it does allow for some imaginative late-game units.

Q. OH REALLY, LIKE WHAT?
The Rocktopus for one, the hulking Xeno Titan and Orbital Laser for another; beats Spearmen and Catapults, that's for sure.

Q. CAN I PLAY NAPOLEON?
Sadly, no. The iconic leaders have given way to a less colourful set of starting options.

BALANCING THE SCALES

Civilization: Beyond Earth does a good job of shaking you out of your habits. The ever-present miasma that restricts far-ranging early game exploration is balanced by dynamically occurring events and quests that keep you reaching for the next milestone. Affinities promote advance-planning and come into their own in the long game, while virtues present a more fluid set of options than the social policies that they replace. While it's easy to find the parallels between this game and its predecessors it becomes increasingly evident how Firaxis has freed-up a number of its concepts to provide greater flexibility. In doing so, it's created another title that will greatly benefit from future expansions.



While the base DNA of *Civilization* hasn't changed, despite its 27th century make-over, *Beyond Earth* does introduce a number of new concepts and uses existing ones in new and interesting ways. There's now much more to do in the early game, for example. Consequently, the number of instances in which you'll have nothing to do but click Next Turn are far fewer. This is primarily due to the new quest system, which tasks you with building particular units, structures, making contact with independent stations or asking you to make a decision on how best to utilise a new technology to garner a bonus to one or more of the game's key pillars. This, in turn, informs the type of civilisation that you're building and, later, feeds into how best to utilise the Affinity system.

The three affinities – Purity, Harmony and Supremacy – determine how you interact with your new home and its indigenous species, and each branch offers incremental bonuses as well as access to unique units that take the place of the civilisation-specific units from previous games. There are also victories tied to each affinity type, which can significantly alter the way that you play right from the get-go, rather than being an end game goal to pursue once you've re-trod familiar early ground.

Underpinning all of this is the overhauled tech tree. Long the staple of linear progression, it is now a sprawling web that reaches out in all directions as a series of broader categories that contain within them more specific options for research. Initially bewildering, a handy search and filtering system enables you to highlight the technologies that best support your chosen play-style or those that can be researched in a hurry, should you find yourself sorely lacking in a particular area. Similarly, the overhauled social policies system, known here as virtues, is organised into tiers that reward breadth as well as depth, so you needn't complete all of the branches of a specific area in order to reap the benefits of synergy bonuses.

In many instances, what initially appear to be counterintuitive changes or even restrictions is actually a case of stripping away some redundant options to grant greater flexibility with how you use what remains. The orbital view system, in particular, grants a wealth of options for resource gathering, border expansion and long-term defence.

Like its predecessor, *Civilization: Beyond Earth* is going to benefit from Firaxis' attentive and proven post-launch development plan. Its series of interconnected systems are well balanced and while some of them will feel disappointingly familiar to series veterans, there's sufficient diversity and flexibility here to feed the series ongoing evolution.

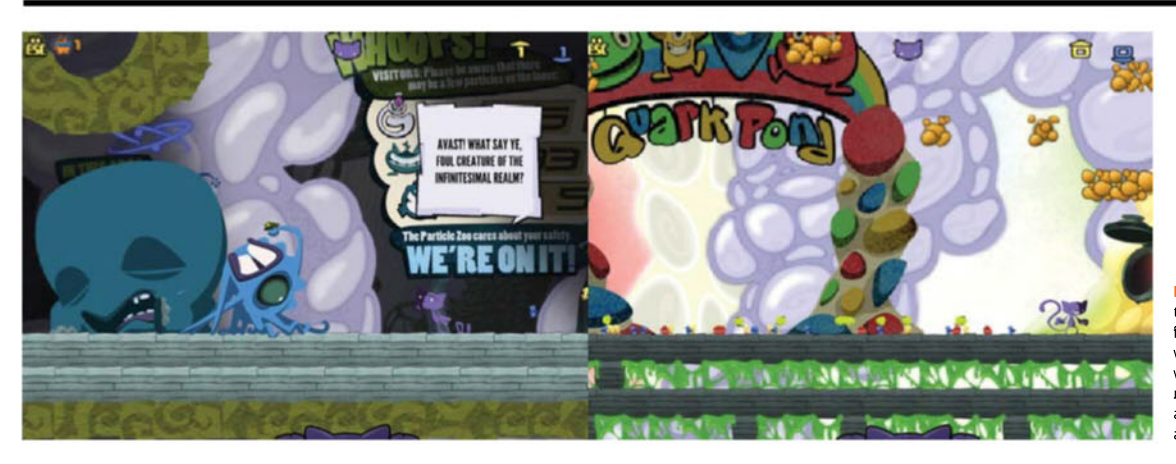
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NATIONAL IDENTITY: The combination of Sponsors, Colonists and Cargo offers an interesting alternative to previous games' iconic civilisations and leaders but results in weaker personalities overall.

VERDICT 8/10

REACHES FOR THE STARS AND ALMOST GETS THERE



Left: The art style helps to keep this game feeling fresh and the idea of working in a subatomic world opens up a lot of room for crazy characters and visuals as you advance through.

FUN AND PARTICLE PHYSICS

Schrödinger's Cat And The Raiders Of The Lost Quark

***Schrödinger's Cat* is a smart game.** Sometimes it's a little too smart for its own good, getting lost down the rabbit hole of bad physics puns and quirkily illustrated depictions of scientific theories. It's also not always as smart as it should be, hitting dead ends that force checkpoint reloading, glitching you through walls and being a little clunky in the controls department. *Schrödinger's Cat* is smart, but it's no genius.

The physics are really the biggest sticking point, and here we're talking about the in-game jumping physics rather than the science. Platforming calls for a sharpness and responsiveness that can be difficult to balance. There's no problem with a little floatiness or even a little inertia as a character lands on a platform, just for a little extra risk, but too much of either and things start to break down. *Schrödinger's Cat* shows a little too much of both on occasions, offering challenging platform jumping without the precision. At this point we might have suggested switching from keyboard controls to a gamepad, but actually to enjoy what this game does best, that would be a mistake.

Beyond the leaping, this game is about exploring the infinitesimal world made large of the Particle Zoo and its elementary particle characters. In particular, gathering up the red, blue, green and yellow Quarks that have been scattered about and combining them in sets of three with the arrow keys to create neat effects is pretty well done. With only four colours and three button inputs, you still get a wide array of results, from generating platforms to throwing grenades. It's a fun idea and hunting down the Quarks can be a great challenge, but one that can sour.

There's a couple of occasions where the solution to the puzzle of moving on through a stage seems to counter the principles the game is teaching you – for instance, leaving Quarks behind rather than collecting them on your first pass because they will get stolen on the way, or not having them reappear after they've been used, as they do on some stages. It can lead to a lot of frustration and not necessarily that much satisfaction when you eventually solve it.

We can see why Team 17 would want to pick this game up from Italic Pig though, as its style and humour feel right at home alongside the likes of *Worms* and *Flockers*. The voice acting is sometimes a bit lame, but also very knowing and tongue-in-cheek. It's got some sophistication, but it can be silly too. If it were a little tighter in its core gameplay it would be easier to recommend.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

QUARK COMBOS: Mixing up your Quarks is one of the most interesting parts of the game. The simple logic of construction, destruction, protection and movement gives clues to find new combos.

DETAILS

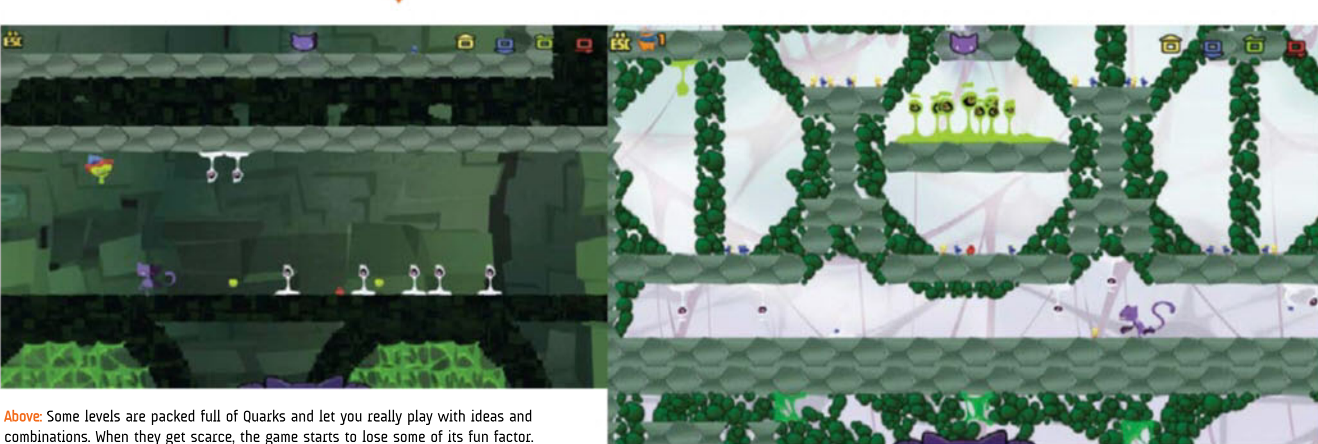
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Italic Pig
DEVELOPER: Team 17
PRICE: $14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Microsoft Windows XP, Intel Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, 2GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: MONOCHROMA

WORSE THAN: FEZ

VERDICT 6/10

PLENTY OF GREY MATTER, LIMITED JOY FACTOR



Above: Some levels are packed full of Quarks and let you really play with ideas and combinations. When they get scarce, the game starts to lose some of its fun factor.

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DEPRESSED DETECTIVE DERIVES DEDUCTIONS

D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Access Games
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1



THE WOLF AMONG US

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

DEADLY PREMONITION



Below: Two years after her death, David Young wants to solve his wife's murder by following her dying instruction.

***D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die* is a deliberate juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange.** It's a murder mystery, but one in which the detective uses evidence as "mementos" to travel back in time. The victim is the protagonist's wife, but her body was found almost entirely drained of blood. Protagonist David Young himself is a typical stubbly dark-haired drinker, but most of the other characters – from the girl who seems to think she's a cat to the fashion designer who insists his mannequin is his "partner" – are really, *really* weird.

Much of your investigation is conversation with these characters, finding evidence in scenes of the past by picking responses – with a higher "Synchro" percentage for those that fit with Young's personality – and pointing out inconsistencies. Wonderfully, you can carry out all of these often-bizarre conversations through voice control, thanks to Kinect.

The entire game can be played just with Kinect, in fact. This might feel a bit like *Deadly Premonition* but it's more point-and-click, though in a twist of self-aware videogame logic you use up stamina (refillable with food) with each interaction. "Grab" a footprint icon to move to that spot. Lean to look around. Wave to open doors. Hold your head to activate Eagle Vision/Detective Mode. "Push" to slap a flight attendant's bottom.

It mostly works, too, particularly in the action sequences in which colourful indicators appear on screen and you have to move your arms in the corresponding direction. These feel almost like an upper-body *Dance Dance Revolution*, complete with performance ratings. Succeed, and Young does dance, dodging attacks and catching projectiles like a B-Movie action hero, though you'll miss most of it as you focus instead on your instructions.

Where Kinect is less reliable is in the quieter moments, like catching the little exclamation marks that pop up temporarily and mean that Young has thoughts to share. These not only make you pay attention during cutscenes and reward you with currency, which you can use to buy food, but the resultant captions are often funny too. You may well want to switch to a standard controller to ensure you don't miss them.

With QTEs relegated to buttons, D4 not only looks like *The Walking Dead* but feels like it too, though the plot makes much less sense. With no word yet on whether there'll be more episodes and how many, those who've been burned by inconclusive episodic series in the past may want to stay away, particularly because of the two available already the first is far better. But the story is not the main draw here, and anyone with an Xbox One who wants to play something different should definitely give this a try.

FINGERPRINT

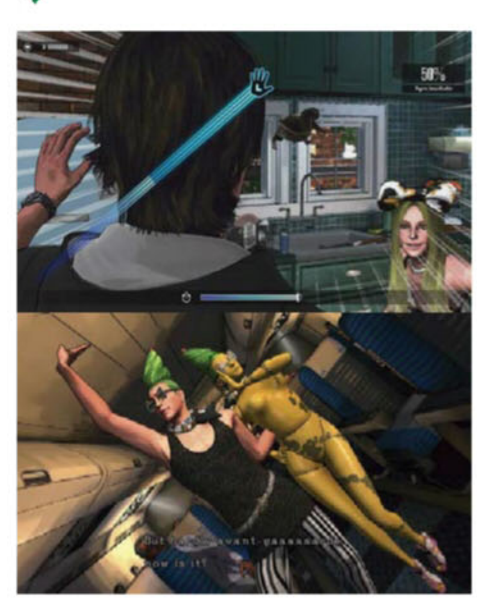
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

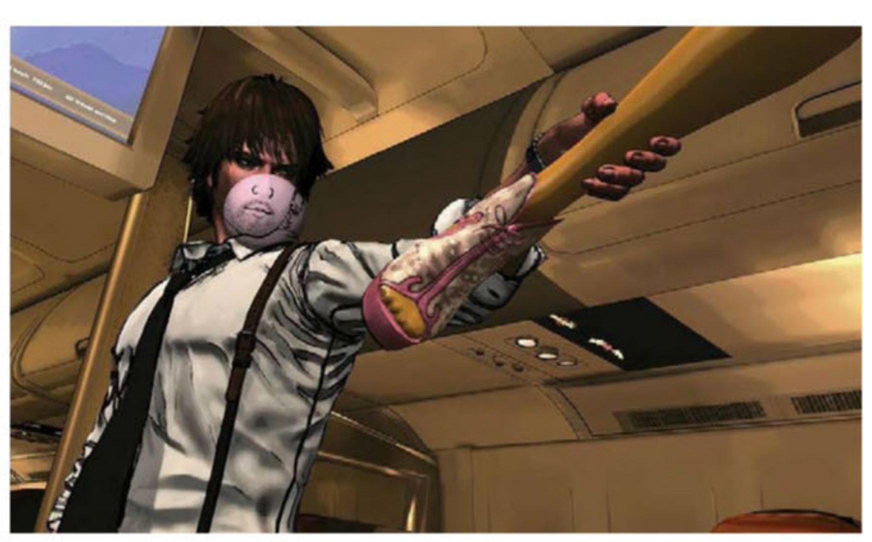
DEFT DIGITS DIRECT DEEDS: You might not expect to find great Kinect compatibility here but the motion controls really do work most of the time, though they can be an effort to maintain.



VERDICT 7/10

INTERESTING MOTION-CONTROLLED MURDER MYSTERY





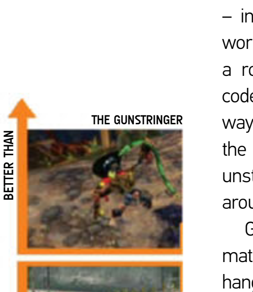
Above: The action sequences are particularly fun when played with Kinect. In one, you strike a batter's pose and swing to have Young use a mannequin's detached leg to hit a ball that knocks out a man's wooden eye.

RIGHT ROUND, BABY, RIGHT ROUND

Roundabout

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: No Goblin
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core i5-2500 or faster, 4GB RAM, NVidia 400/AMD 6000 or higher
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



***Roundabout* is the kind of game that you have to force your friends to try for themselves before they'll understand, because the elevator pitch will just get you funny looks.** Described as a "Seventies B-movie game where you drive a constantly revolving limousine", this is *Crazy Taxi* on LSD, and it's wonderful.

It turns out that constant turning was the additional factor driving games needed to turn them from mindless occupation into satisfying challenge. Take roundabouts, a popular feature of the town – Roundabout – in which *Roundabout* is set. In the real world, the direction in which you drive around a roundabout is dictated by the highway code. In *Roundabout*, you judge it by which way your limousine is spinning, easing into the lane at the right moment so that the unstoppable revolution carries you safely around the curve.

Getting from A to B in *Roundabout* is a matter of weaving through cluttered streets, hanging back in wider spaces so that you can enter tighter ones at the right point in your turn. Coins that build up a score multiplier encourage momentum, but a stronger draw is the feeling of flow when you judge a sequence of obstacles just right. As you progress, the obstacles become more obnoxious, but you also learn new skills, such as the ability to change the direction of your spin or to jump onto buildings.

Crash into a wall or tree trunk too many times and your limo explodes, but you're never sent back too far. And *Roundabout* is forgiving on what constitutes an obstruction. Fences and traffic cones were made to be scattered, and pedestrians are collateral damage, disappearing beneath your tyres with a squelch and a red smear

Cunningly, any evidence of low production values is forgiven as it fits with the overall design. That B-movie flavour is most obvious, and most delightful, in the live action cut scenes. Each is deliberately low budget, filmed in the backseat or against a low-res backdrop, with a cast of corny characters from druggie Disco Sylvain to Georgio's love interest Beth. Some brief exposition and off you go, taking a vicar to kidnap an unwilling groom, or helping a park ranger run down the Endangered Bird Hunting Committee.

Roundabout's story is ridiculous, funny, occasionally moving, and even when it's over you'll want to keep going: replaying missions to fulfil objectives, trying to top the leaderboards in different challenges, collecting paint jobs and upgrades, maybe even playing through all the main missions as quickly as possible in the "eSports Speedrun Mode". Not because of that completionist compulsion either, but because driving a revolving limousine is so much fun that you'll want more reasons to play.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

VIVE LA REVOLUTION: Unless you've played *Kuru Kuru Kururin*, a puzzle game for the Game Boy Advance, *Roundabout* will feel entirely new to you. Try going back to normal driving games after this.



Above: As well as low-res 3:4 video clips and the outfits, *Roundabout*'s Seventies theme is also emphasised with a '70s post processing' visual setting which, with the motion blur effect, can be switched off.







Above: When you need to navigate through a particularly tight space, *Roundabout* will shift the camera to a top-down view.

VERDICT 8/10

DON'T JUDGE A GAME BY ITS GIMMICKY-SOUNDING PREMISE

TAME BURTON

Murasaki Baby

This might sound like a surprising comparison to make for a game that paints its somewhat macabre world using a palette born of Tim Burton movies and Edward Gorey illustrations, but there's something of *Tearaway* in *Murasaki Baby.* Not in terms of aesthetics, of course, nor even of particular mechanics. Rather, their similarity lies in the fact that *Murasaki Baby* is a game that's been constructed with the Vita in mind from the outset.

Instead of controlling the small child that is the game's protagonist using the thumbsticks, as you would in any other title, you must use the touchscreen to hold their hand and lead them through the world. That you have little control of the game's star is interesting in and of itself – she will refuse to move forward if scared, will occasionally bolt off into danger and so on – and there are moments where the game smartly leverages that unique aspect to draw out powerful reactions from the protective bond you form.

As well as using the Vita's touchscreen in order to interact with *Murasaki Baby*'s dark and twisted world, the rear touchpad frequently comes into play, representing as it does the primary means of solving the puzzles that you need to overcome in order to progress. Swiping across the touchpad will change the nature of the world itself, as delineated by a swap of background, a change of colour and a shift of audio. You can then tap the rear touchpad to create different effects – causing it to rain in order to raise a log, for example.

Murasaki Baby is a game with some great ideas, then, and it's for that reason that we want to like it more than we actually do. Unfortunately, there are some problems. For one thing, the solutions to the puzzles that you're confronted with are all pretty obvious and the systems that we've described never end up being as interesting as they might initially sound as a result. That transparent nature of the game's puzzles can even become a source of frustration when you find that a lack of responsiveness means you fail and are pushed back to try again. You know what you're supposed to be doing, but the action that you're trying to perform isn't recognised by the game, or, because you're being asked to interact with two things on the screen using your fingers, you can't quite see the obstacles that are thwarting you.

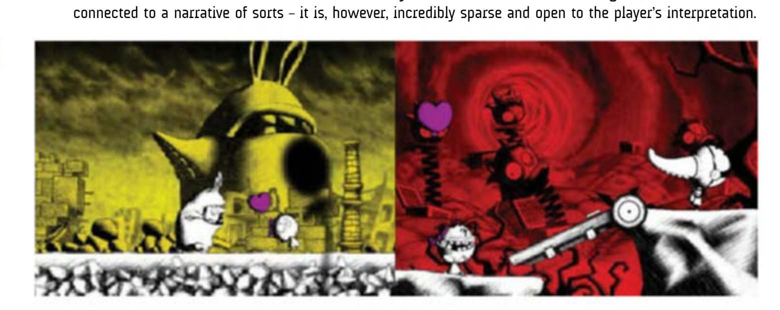
It's a shame that the game is occasionally let down by its control scheme because it is anything but derivative and its visuals, excellent sound design and mechanics can coalesce to create moments of real impact. Those moments are not regular enough to compensate for the sometimes frustrating experience of playing the game, however.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: SCE
DEVELOPER: Ovosonico
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: There are a number of characters that you meet over the course of the game, each of which is connected to a narrative of sorts – it is, however, incredibly sparse and open to the player's interpretation.



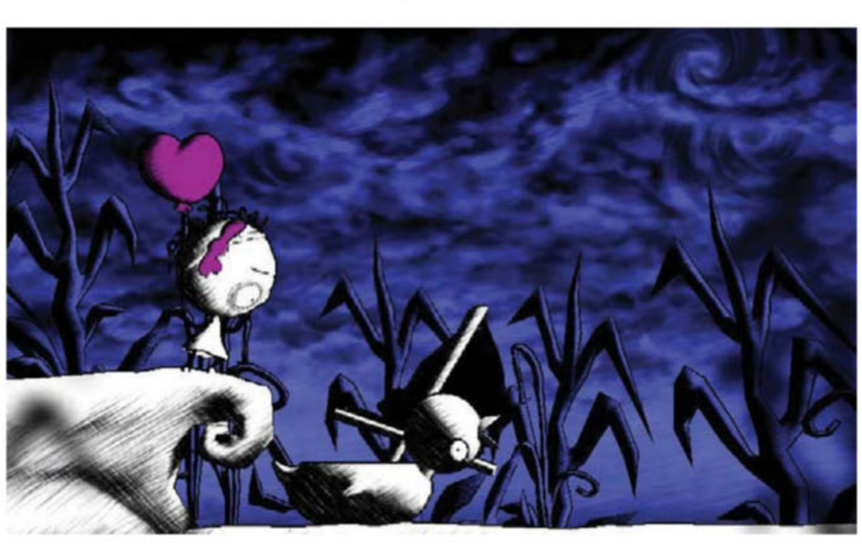
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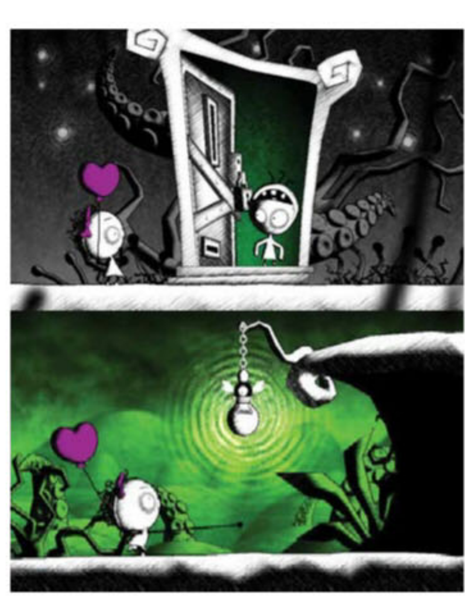
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

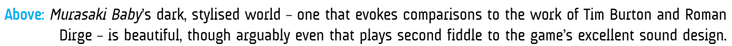
THE LOOKING GLASS: *Murasaki Baby* keeps you on the outside – you can only guide the game's protagonist and affect her surroundings rather than taking direct control of her.

VERDICT 6/10

SOME INTRIGUING IDEAS LET DOWN BY IMPLEMENTATION



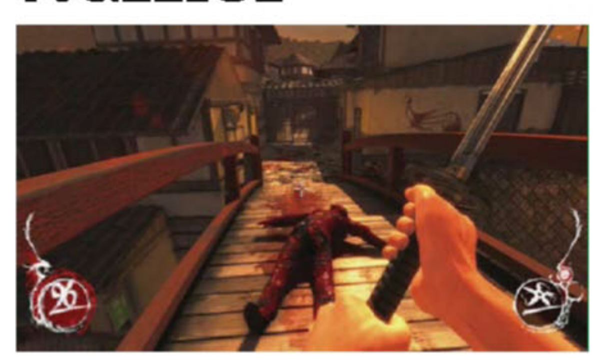




Above: *Murasaki Baby*'s dark, stylised world – one that evokes comparisons to the work of Tim Burton and Roman Dirge – is beautiful, though arguably even that plays second fiddle to the game's excellent sound design.

JUMPING THE GUN

Shadow Warrior





Above: Almost all of your special moves and attacks utilise the left thumbstick, and demand needlepoint precision. In such a frantic game this is tantamount to madness; you're often left hopping from side to side while attempting to finish a stunned enemy.

The tasteless, unrefined yin to *Wolfenstein: The New Order*'s classy and thoughtful yang, *Shadow Warrior* is an FPS reboot that's aimed pretty squarely at undemanding nostalgists. Do you pine for the days in which endlessly circle-strafing was the most valuable weapon in your arsenal? Do you like your "secrets" to be extraordinarily well sign-posted? Are you a sucker for enemy AI that's as simplistic and predictable as humanly possible? If you just nodded more than once, then this newfangled *Shadow Warrior* might be your game of the year.

But as bluntly entertaining as it occasionally is, it's a prosaic washout in terms of design. The twelve-hour campaign basically never changes: you career through a procession of bland, empty environments either dispatching enemies or looking for a switch of some kind in order to progress. The rigid and mechanical enemies look like direct descendants of *GoldenEye*'s angular bulb heads, and the multi-category skill tree is an exercise in clueless overkill. First person shooters don't get much more straightforward than this, and yet there are *nine* upgrade tiers and three different currencies to support them. These systems don't even create an illusion of depth; it feels like shot-in-the-dark desperation.

The action is absurdly zippy, so much so that it'll make the last FPS you played feel as if it took place underwater. The original *Shadow Warrior* was essentially a *Duke Nukem* reskin, and that totally relentless pace has been preserved here; you don't so much walk through these vacant arenas as perpetually glide. The incessant carnage is leavened by a fairly plentiful supply of terrible jokes, but the tone is larky and eager to please rather than spiteful or lewd. The plot is nonsensical but even it if wasn't, the cutscenes (and there are several) are inexplicably rammed with pregnant pauses and inaction, and are thus entirely worth skipping.

With the exception of a couple of adequate setpieces, you're never forced to choose between wielding your sword and wielding a firearm, which is a welcome touch. The swordplay is more tangible and infinitely more enjoyable than the shooting anyway because, even when you're blasting away with a fully upgraded shotgun, gunplay is weightless and bereft of any impact. Presentation is often dire, too: loading times are protracted, and some menu prompts are permanently clipped by the edges of the screen on Xbox One.

It feels unsporting to castigate something for being so cheap, but the reality is that *Shadow Warrior* is four or five mindless, carefree hours stretched to more than double that; a retro tour of a simpler era that just doesn't know when to quit. The campaign begins with gameplay footage of the 1997 original, presumably to remind you of just how much gaming has changed since then. The flourish is completely unnecessary.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MORE THAN GAGS: Lead character Lo Wang, harty har, actually has something resembling a personality here. In 1997 he was nothing but a fountain of diabolical puns and brash, often dubious wisecracks.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 4, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Flying Wild Hog
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1

BETTER THAN — RED STEEL

WORSE THAN — RED STEEL 2

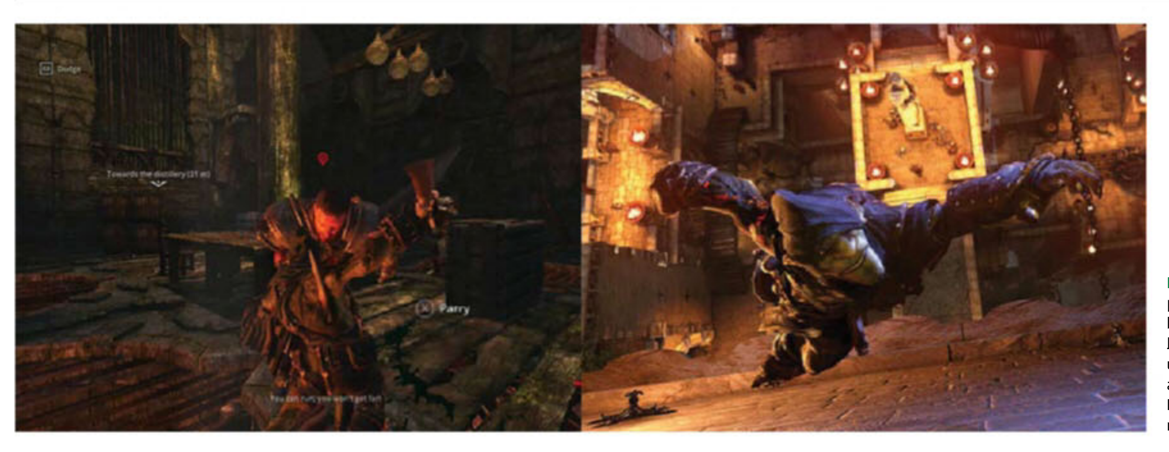


VERDICT 5/10
A FITFULLY ENJOYABLE LOW BUDGET SLOG

Below: The environments are so clichéd that long stretches of the game are downright laborious. Exploding acid enemies? Sewer level? Two of them. Invisible walls? You bet.







Left: Despite its humble price point, *Styx* is by no means a bad-looking game. Murky and uninspired, maybe, but also smooth and textured. It's the return of the middle-tier videogame.

SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF

Styx: Master Of Shadows

For a few years, the middle-tier game had all but died. The market couldn't support full-priced affairs that didn't promise the earth, and the abundance of budget indie games meant anything hovering inbetween had nowhere to live. Now with new consoles allowing Steam-like self-publication and variable price points, games like *Styx: Master Of Shadows* have a place to ply their wares. We'll leave it up to you to decide whether or not that's a good thing in this particular case.

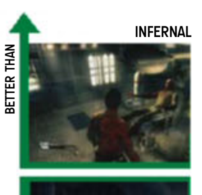
Playing as the titular Styx, you creep through a defiantly generic set of stealth scenarios, trying to piece together your past, over the span of 200 years. Styx is a goblin (the first, according to this lore), and an assassin. The game begins with a fairly feeble cutscene explaining that our man Styx has been captured by humans and has to escape, find his dagger, and then set about accumulating Amber (the glowing stuff that powers him and lets him unleash his more interesting capabilities).

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Cyanide
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

INFERNAL





WORSE THAN

ALIEN ISOLATION

It's third person stealth as you've seen it many times before. Guards strut about dimly-lit rooms in predetermined patterns, reacting only to your presence should you stupidly stroll into their line of sight. You hide in corners, behind walls and up on high beams, ready to leap on your enemies and stab them multiple times in the chest like the nasty little bugger you are. Hide the body, move on, repeat. It's a smooth and functional game, but one almost entirely lacking in flair. For the most part, you're executing plans and executing guards in a manner you've done many times before. If you've played anything from *Splinter Cell* through to *Assassin's Creed*, you'll be in instantly familiar territory.

Styx does pick up some reasonably interesting abilities later on in the story. He can cloak himself for a brief period of time, which proves useful when you run out of patience memorising guard AI routines. More impressively, he can also create a clone of himself that will run around the environment causing trouble while you sneak through or deal death. Unlike many modern stealth efforts that also revert into action games when you're spotted, *Styx: Master Of Shadows* is not as accomplished. Direct combat is a terrible idea for two reasons. Firstly, you'll almost always be killed if you face up to more than one opponent. Secondly, it's awful.

Combat is a clumsy QTE, parrying incoming attacks before striking back. This sounds like *Batman*, but it's more like a knock-off of *Punch Out*. Competent, middle-tier filler, and little more.

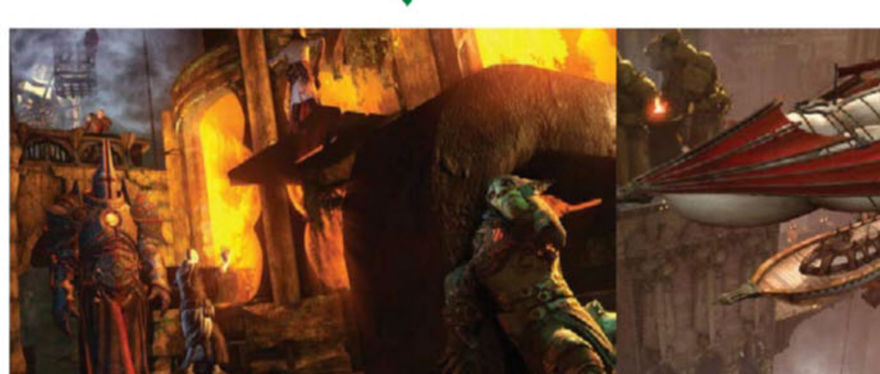
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CLONE WARS: Styx has most of the typical stealth tricks, but later in the game he can create a clone of himself to distract guards while he gets on with his killing.

VERDICT 5/10

MEDIOCRE, CUT-PRICE STEALTH



Above: This is actually a sequel to little-known cult favourite *Of Orcs And Men*, but you don't need to have played that game to get *Styx*. They simply share a character.

HERD MENTALITY

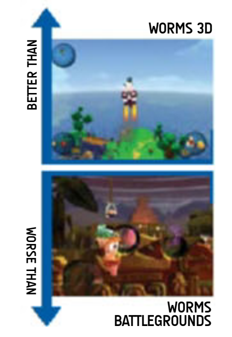
Flockers

"Meat The Flockers" suggests the promotional material, demonstrating even before you've loaded up the game that Team17 is happy to openly take inspiration from wherever it fancies. Here, "Flockers" are the sheep from the *Worms* series, and "meat" is what they inevitably become when placed in a game so unashamedly like *Lemmings*. It's strange that these sheep would bother to try to escape the Worms' weapons factory when they have no sense of self-preservation. Like Lemmings, they know only to march onwards until thwarted, be that by reaching the end of the level, some kind of obstacle, a specific command from the player, or – most likely – their gruesome death. Your job is to use commands to get them past obstacles, to the end of the 2D level retaining as much life as possible.

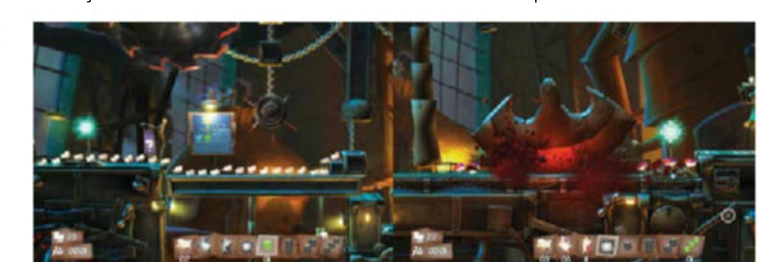
Of course, you have limited control, both in range of commands and the number of times you can use each. Only three are particularly interesting: the ability to jump (represented, comically enough, by giving that sheep a woolly hat), the ability to scale walls (thanks, somehow, to a cape), and the order to self-destruct. Aside from those, you're limited to using some of the sheep to create different kinds of shapes to help/hinder the others to move onwards, with a "release" command that then frees those that are frozen.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: The levels are full of traps that spring as if from nowhere to crush or slice up or impale whole swathes of your flock at once. Your DualShock 4 even flashes red to match the copious amounts of blood on screen.



Each level is a sprawling puzzle with death at every wrong turn. Often you have to contend with time as well as space, rationing your commands while also keeping an eye on swinging blades and chomping blocks. You might find it funny when your first sheep dies with a screamed bleat and a red squelch, your DualShock 4 controller flashing red to match, but it soon becomes a particularly visceral representation of your frustration.

The problem more often than not is that it's hard to sit back and puzzle things through properly. You can pause and look around, zooming in and out, but it feels clunky with a gamepad. Even without that, it's hard to see the steps ahead as the levels often consist of multiple teleporters with unknown pathways and buttons with unknown consequences.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

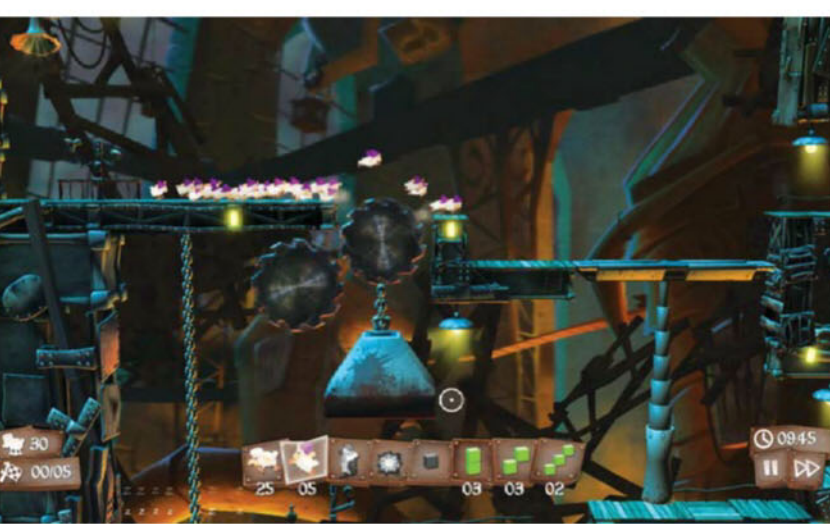
REWIND: With levels so huge you have to pan and zoom and squint to see what's going on, it's a pain to have to restart. A rewind button would certainly help.

When the answer to this dilemma is usually trial and error, and those errors generally can't be fixed without restarting the level, this is not a game for anyone lacking in patience.

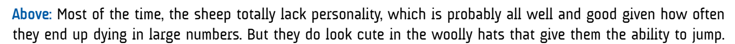
Aside from a few more inventive examples, most of the game's levels end up feeling like never-ending drudgery. Those with a particular fondness for difficult puzzles and plenty of time to spare may enjoy playing each level again and again in order to rescue as many sheep and get as high a score as possible. But for everyone else, there's just not enough variety or personality here to provide that amount of motivation.



TOO MUCH FRUSTRATION, NOT ENOUGH FUN







Above: Most of the time, the sheep totally lack personality, which is probably all well and good given how often they end up dying in large numbers. But they do look cute in the woolly hats that give them the ability to jump.

WHY I ♥...

Zork

CHRIS CHARLA, ID@XBOX DIRECTOR

"Literally the first time I saw a computer was at a friend's house and they had Zork*. It was my first computer, my first game and the first time I saw the glowing green text on a screen. I remember everyone was stuck in this one room – we had like eight kids crowded around one kid typing – and everyone was stuck in this one room known as the Loud Room where everything you type just echoed. I was the youngest kid there and I said 'Type echo' and they did and that was how you got past the puzzle. Everyone was like 'Wow. You did it!' Right then I was done. There was no chance after that that I wasn't going to be a gamer for the rest of my life."*

```
Forest
of a white house,
door.
There is a small

>look mailbox
West of House
You are standing
of a white house,
door.
There is a small

>
Beg pardon?

>w
Forest
This is a forest,
directions around
there appears to

>
Beg pardon?

>
```

Score: 0/2
with a boarded front

mailbox here.

in an open field west
with a boarded front

mailbox here.

with trees in all
you. To the east,
be sunlight.

> “Right then I was done. There was no chance after that that I wasn’t going to be a gamer for the rest of my life.”
>
> **CHRIS CHARLA, ID@XBOX DIRECTOR**

RETRO



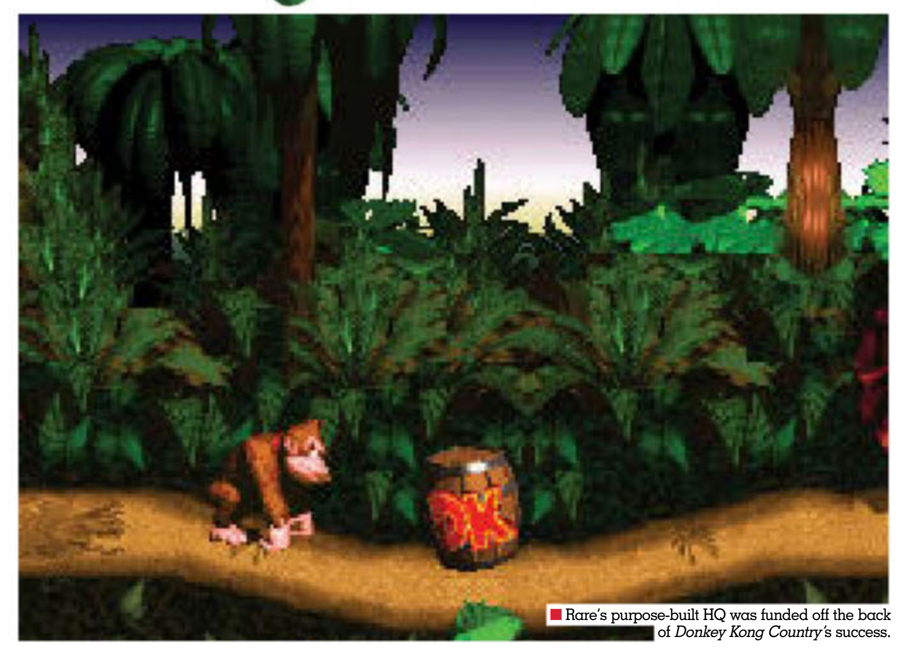
DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**



BEHIND THE SCENES

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

It's been 20 years since British studio Rare rebooted one of Nintendo's first mascots, giving us the ideal excuse to uncover the history of this smashing SNES title



Rare's purpose-built HQ was funded off the back of *Donkey Kong Country's* success.

Released: 1994
Format: SNES
Publisher: Nintendo
Key Staff: Gregg Mayles (Designer), Tim Stamper (Producer), Chris Sutherland (Lead Programmer), Brendan Gunn (Programmer), David Wise (Music)

PRETTY MUCH EVERY game development studio of note has a title in its back catalogue that can be seen as a pivotal point in its evolution and growth. Valve has *Half Life*, id Software has *Doom*, and Square has *Final Fantasy*; these games provided the momentum that has propelled such esteemed companies to global stardom, and without these significant successes, it's highly plausible that such famous code houses might not even exist today. UK-based Rare is no exception to this rule. While the firm wasn't in any danger of falling into obscurity during the early Nineties, it's hard to imagine that it would have become quite as big as it is today without the propulsion provided by the 1994 SNES smash-hit *Donkey Kong Country*.

Today, Rare is a wholly owned subsidiary of Microsoft Game Studios and operates out of a purpose-built, high-tech HQ in the idyllic Leicestershire countryside, but prior to reviving the *Donkey Kong* brand, it was based in the rather less-modern surroundings of a Grade II listed farmhouse, just a few miles up the road from its current residence. Despite the lack of swanky offices, it was just as fascinating a place to work as legend might have you believe. "Rare was an amazing place back then," recalls Brendan Gunn, who was employed as a technical programmer on *Donkey Kong Country* and had previously worked on the NES classic *Captain Skyhawk*. "It was quite a small company with a real family feel. Games were created in a very organic way, not planned out in detail in advance. We were always free to just try out ideas. Whatever worked would stay, and if it didn't feel good, we just ripped it back out again. In those days, it was not uncommon for entire games to be shelved if they didn't show enough promise. I think this was key to keeping the quality high."

Following a string of commercial successes during the late Eighties and early Nineties, the Stampers faced an uncertain future – as did the industry in general. The next generation of systems had started to arrive in the form of the 3DO, Amiga CD32 and Philips CD-i, but owners of existing 16-bit consoles seemed curiously reticent to upgrade, thanks largely to the unproven nature of CD-ROM systems and the high cost of new hardware. Sensing that the current generation still had some life in it but simultaneously mindful of an exciting new era just around the corner, the Stampers began to invest heavily in new graphics tech with the ultimate aim of creating one of the most advanced code houses in the British Isles.

It was a risky strategy, which involved great expense and temporarily limited the development output of the studio, but it was one that ultimately paid off; encouraged by the work being undertaken in Twycross, publishing partner Nintendo decided it was time to invest in the firm and promptly purchased 49 per cent of the company. "Rare began experimenting with creating 3D-rendered characters with our expensive new Silicon Graphics computers," Gunn explains, likening the situation to a perfect storm of events. "Visitors from Nintendo were suitably impressed by what we were working on, and Rare became a second-party developer. Rare had already impressed Nintendo with some excellent games, several of which Nintendo had actually published themselves. The obvious potential of pre-rendered 3D graphics would have sealed the deal, especially as the SNES was nearing the end of its life, and Nintendo was a little behind the competition in developing the next generation of 3D-capable consoles."

WHATEVER WORKED WOULD STAY, AND IF IT DIDN'T FEEL GOOD, WE JUST RIPPED IT BACK OUT AGAIN

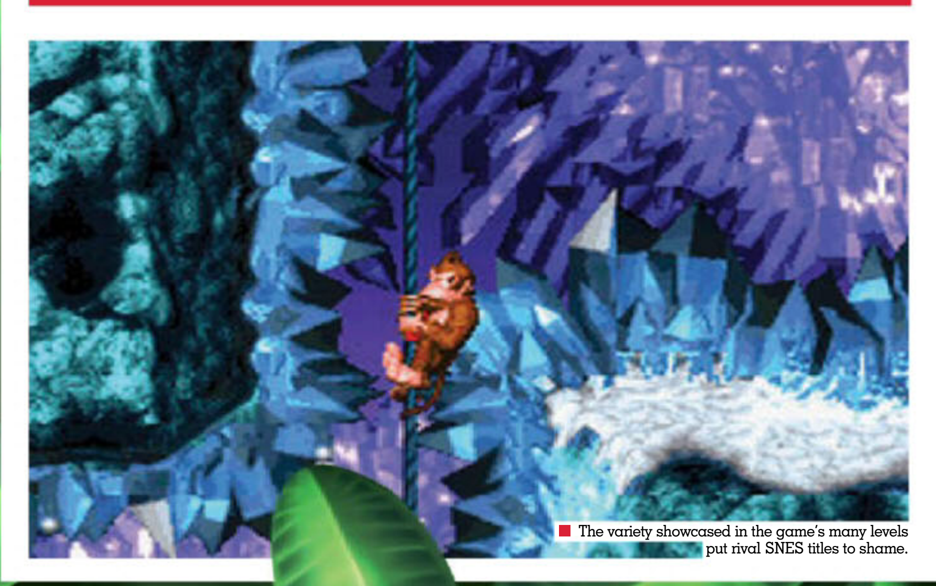
NINTENDO'S EXECS WERE so taken with what Rare had achieved with its shiny-new Silicon Graphics workstations that it effectively opened up its vault of properties and allowed the British company to take its pick – within reason, of course. "At this point, the door was open for the Stampers to push for the use of some existing Nintendo IP," Gunn says. "Obviously, they wouldn't give us a treasured character like Mario, but Donkey Kong had been largely abandoned for some time, and this was a chance to give him a new burst of life." Indeed, save for a few cameo roles, the mighty Kong had been largely dormant for the best part of a decade; his last outing was 1983's *Donkey Kong 3*. Ironically, during 1994 another Kong game would hit the market in shape of the Game Boy title *Donkey Kong '94* (see "1994's Other Kong"), but it was more of a retooling of the 1981 original than an entirely new

1994'S OTHER KONG

With two Kongs around, 1994 marked the battle of the apes



WHILE RARE MANAGED to kick-start Kong's career with *Donkey Kong Country* and turn the massive, bumbling primate into a household name once again, it wasn't the only title he starred in during the bumper year of 1994. June (September in Europe) saw the launch of an all-new Donkey Kong adventure on the monochrome Game Boy system that is often referred to as *Donkey Kong '94*. Based loosely on the original 1981 arcade machine that started it all, it begins with the coin-op's first four levels, but quickly changes pace with 97 all-new stages that take the core gameplay seen in Kong's debut and turn it on its head with all manner of enhancements and improvements. Our hero Mario (who reverts back to his not-so-Super guise for this release) can swim, climb ropes and even catch incoming barrels, and there are boss fights to contend with as well. While the arcade game was a score-based venture, this portable outing is blessed with a battery back-up facility so that players can retain their progress. All things considered, *Donkey Kong '94* is a fantastic update to the coin-guzzling original and rightly received critical acclaim on its release; however, hitting the market in the same year as Rare's legendary title perhaps dented its chances of long-lasting fame, and it has been rather overshadowed in the years that have followed. Thankfully, it hasn't been totally forgotten and is currently available on the 3DS Virtual Console, where it is well-worth investigating. One final point of interest is that Kong is wearing a red tie in this title, an item of clothing that Rare would factor into its own interpretation of the famous character – an interpretation that, it should be pointed out, has become the accepted norm on this infamous character since the launch of *Donkey Kong Country*.



The variety showcased in the game's many levels put rival SNES titles to shame.

adventure, and its release did little to detract from Rare's grand vision.

Gunn's role on *Donkey Kong Country* was a technical one, and he had to come up with the code that would make everything sing. His contribution was an incredibly important one, but even so, he was unprepared for the first time that he laid eyes on Rare's fresh interpretation of gaming's most famous ape. "I was really amazed the first time I saw a 3D-rendered Donkey Kong model on screen," he recalls more than twenty years later. "It looked so different from traditional hand-drawn graphics, and far ahead of what consoles would be able to render in real-time for many years to come. It was very exciting and inspiring to work with these graphics. All my previous games had been solo projects in terms of programming, so *Donkey Kong Country* was different in that I could spend all of my time focused on the visuals, leaving the gameplay to Chris Sutherland. For me, that was a bigger difference than the pre-rendering. I was able to put a lot of time into really optimising the use of video RAM to get a lot of variation in the graphics. We didn't want it to look like there was a lot of repeated images on screen. I also spent a lot of time adding lots of layers of parallax in the backgrounds, and adding the day-to-night transitions and weather effects."

Those familiar with the geography of the English Midlands will be aware that Rare's HQ isn't the only thing that the small and rather sleepy village of Twycross is famous for – it also boasts an internationally renowned zoo, which houses the largest selection of monkeys and apes in the western hemisphere, making it the ideal research target for a game studio creating a title showcasing plenty of hairy primates. That's what you'd assume at least, but sadly the trip that occurred during the creation of *Donkey Kong Country* would prove to be a waste of effort. "I was not involved in the zoo visit, but I understand it was ultimately fruitless," Gunn smiles. "The animators tried making Donkey Kong move like a real ape, but it just didn't look right in the game and he finished up moving more like a galloping horse."

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY was designed from the ground up to be a ground-breaking visual spectacle, but like so many titles of the period, it took inspiration from one of the oldest SNES games: *Super Mario World*. Kong is able to jump onto the heads of enemies – just like Mario – and collects bananas instead of coins; he also traverses a massive overworld map and is able to move freely between stages using connected pathways – something that was popularised by the *Super Mario* series. To call this slavish cloning might be a little overzealous, but few would deny the fact that Rare's prestigious Nineties output benefited greatly from ideas generated by the Japanese company with which it shared a very intimate relationship. "Rare has made a lot of original games," starts Gunn, "But when it comes to working on familiar genres, we always looked to Nintendo for inspiration. Why not learn from the best? We always tried to put our own spin on things – not simply copying Nintendo's games – but they often found brilliant solutions to



■ The map screens hold a hidden regret for Gunn, who wishes he'd spent more time on pathways.

WHAT THEY SAID...

With such a strong replay value, *Donkey Kong Country* is sure to be a colossal hit this holiday. If you want to hit an ape ball in the side pocket, you'll recognise *DKC* for what it is: the gorilla of your dreams

GamePro, 1994

common problems, so it would be foolish not to copy a few ideas."

That's not to say that the team designing the game didn't come up with a few unique notions of their own – one of these being the use of Post It notes to plan out level designs, which resulted in some particularly memorable stages. "We wanted a process that allowed us to visually build up the level plans and also allow fast iteration at the initial design stage," Gregg Mayles tells us. Mayles worked as the main designer on the game and is still employed at Rare today, making him one of the studio's longest-serving staffers. While creating level layouts on paper certainly isn't anything innovative in the games industry, Post Its permitted the designer to switch scenes and change the plan quickly and effortlessly, rather than having to redraw entire portions of the level. "Drawing things on bits of paper that could be shuffled around, reworked or replaced was ideal," continues Mayles – who, like Gunn, is a local lad and was born just a few miles from Rare's Twycross HQ. "Someone suggested these bits of paper could be Post It notes and it all went from there. It was a real revelation at the time and I still use Post Its at the heart of my design process today."

Given that Nintendo was bankrolling the creation of this new title – and that it used one of the company's most famous faces – you might assume that the Japanese veteran was quite hands-on with development. Gunn explains that even if such meetings took place – and only the Stampers really know the truth on the score – the team was kept well away from any distractions that could possibly impact the final product. "We had a great deal of creative freedom," Gunn enthuses. "As an individual, I felt free to try anything that could make the game look better, and as a company, I think Rare was allowed to make *Donkey Kong Country* very much our own product. Tim and Chris would always shield the team as much as possible from outside influences so we could focus on making the games to the best of our abilities. I understand that in the early stages of development, Miyamoto was very keen to exert some control over the look of the Donkey Kong character, as Tim had pushed his design a long way from the original. The final look was a great compromise – and I'm pleased to see that Nintendo hasn't deviated very much since then." Indeed, Donkey Kong today sports a look that is based more on the SNES titles than his previous adventures – an admission by Nintendo that Rare created the most aesthetically pleasing iteration of the great ape.

■■■ THE STAMPERS HAVE since left Rare to pursue other projects – it was recently revealed that Tim has founded a smartphone game studio in Nottingham called FortuneFish with his son, Joe – but their impact on *Donkey Kong Country* cannot be understated. "They were a huge influence," says Gunn. "In particular I remember Tim was a great motivator as well as a very talented artist. He would spend a lot of time with me, always pushing me to take things to the next level. For example, just having it rain wasn't enough. It should rain way in the distance first, and then gradually bring it forwards until it's raining in all the layers of the screen." This graphical flourish is one aspect of the game that Gunn is particularly proud of. "My favourite bit is the combination of the weather effects and multi-layered parallaxing. I really enjoyed hearing other engineers trying to figure out how we crammed so much graphical variation in each level. Look at *Super Mario World* for comparison; its a lovely game, but I see so much obvious repetition in the graphics."

DRAWING THINGS ON BITS OF PAPER THAT COULD BE SHUFFLED AROUND WAS IDEAL

Speaking of Mario, it was reported at the time of development that Shigeru Miyamoto was less than impressed with Rare's efforts, allegedly bemoaning the fact that gamers of the time were dazzled by visuals and not gameplay. Miyamoto himself has publicly refuted this stance in recent years – stating quite correctly that as Kong's daddy, he was intimately involved with the production of the title – but could the graphically stunning *Donkey Kong Country* have caused the famous designer to feel a little jealous, given that he was working on the more visually simplistic *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island* at the time? "I only really know what's been reported on the internet, and we all know that's the best place in



Barrels were put to good use in the game, offering everything from a friendly ape to rocket propulsion.

Rideable allies was another aspect that was borrowed from *Super Mario World*.

Even after being sold to Microsoft, Rare would port *Donkey Kong Country* – and its sequels – to the Game Boy Advance.





Who needs 32 or even 64-bit when Nintendo can keep pulling marvels out of the 16-bit hat? *Donkey Kong Country* is simply mind-blowing

EGM, 1994

the world for finding opinion rather than fact," laughs Gunn when asked about Miyamoto's comments. "I know Miyamoto was passionate about the game during development, and so were the people at Rare, but that doesn't mean we all wanted the same things. Japanese games have some very distinct differences from games in the west, and the brilliant Shigeru Miyamoto has been a big part of the Japanese style. I'm sure he would have made the game very differently, but I'm confident that he must also appreciate some of the qualities that made it stand out from his own games."

Deadlines in videogame development are so often dictated by the purchasing habits of players, and Rare was working to a strict schedule with *Donkey Kong Country* – the game had to hit store shelves during the lucrative holiday season in North America. Gunn admits that the team was able to fulfil its objectives in time for launch, but even so, there are things he would like to have spent more time on. "No project ever really feels complete," he says. "I could always go back and keep improving things, but at some point you just have to draw a line under it and let it out into the world. Having said that, the only thing I'm really unhappy about in *Donkey Kong Country* is in the map pages. We have these beautifully rendered map screens with winding paths linking each area of the game, and I just did a lazy straight line path for Donkey Kong to walk along instead of accurately following the path. I'm a little embarrassed by that."

THANKFULLY THE GENERAL public didn't seem to pay any notice to the lack of winding pathways, and *Donkey Kong Country* became a runaway hit, shifting almost 10 million copies worldwide and effectively delaying the onset of the next-generation revolution; the game assured SNES owners that there was little sense in dropping an insane amount of cash on a 3DO or Jaguar when their current console was capable of producing such amazing visuals. Two SNES-based sequels would follow, and Gunn worked on both – yet he freely admits that he doesn't hold the same level of affection for them as the trailblazing original. "I worked on both of the SNES sequels, as well as *Donkey Kong 64*," he recounts. "Again for the SNES sequels, I was focused on the graphics, and I continued to refine some of the techniques I'd used in the original. I was particularly pleased with the 3D effect inside the flooded ship – I can't even remember whether that was *Donkey Kong Country 2* or *Donkey Kong Country 3*. The dripping honey effect in *Donkey Kong Country 2* was quite satisfying, too. Although the sequels were more polished in a number of ways, I don't look back on them with the same fondness as the original. I just don't really like retreading old ground."

I KNOW MIYAMOTO WAS PASSIONATE ABOUT THE GAME DURING DEVELOPMENT

Nevertheless, Gunn's involvement with the *Donkey Kong Country* series would have a dramatic impact on his life thanks to the bonus scheme that Rare operated during his tenure with the company, which ensured that staff benefited from their hard work should their games turn out to be big sellers. Is it fair to say that these releases changed his life? "*Donkey Kong Country* and its sequels were pretty lucrative,

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Super Mario World > DK Country > Clockwork Knight



Shigeru Miyamoto's seminal 16-bit smash hit was a massive influence on practically every 2D platformer.





Sega's *Saturn*-based 2D platform epic took the 3D rendered visuals of *Donkey Kong Country* to the next level.

but 'life-changing' is perhaps a little strong," he replies with a chuckle. "I'd definitely say 'life-enhancing'!" Gunn now works outside of the games industry with a design firm in Ashby-de-la-Zouch – a small town just minutes away from Rare's Twycross HQ and the place where Tim and Chris Stamper originally founded the company back in Eighties, under the moniker Ashby Computers & Graphics – and remains very proud of the things he achieved during his time with the studio. "It was great working with so many talented people over so many years, but for me *Donkey Kong Country* was the pinnacle. The best part was working with such an amazing team."



Rare created an entire Kong family for the game, including the memorable Cranky Kong.

CONTINUATION OF KONG

The line of Nintendo's infamous ape didn't end with Rare

When Microsoft purchased Rare it drew a line under the studio's involvement with the Donkey Kong character it had done so much to revitalise. However, it thankfully didn't mean the end of the *Donkey Kong Country* series, as in 2010 Nintendo enlisted Texas-based Retro Studios to create *Donkey Kong Country Returns* for the Wii. It was a critical and commercial success and managed to capture much of the magic of the originals – a remarkable achievement when you consider that Rare wasn't involved in its production. The game would be ported to the Nintendo 3DS in 2012 by Monster Games, and Retro would return to the series in 2014 with *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* on the Wii U.







During the game's memorable intro, Kong performs his own dance routine before being caught in a CGI explosion.



THE RETRO GUIDE TO... BLIZZARD

As World Of Warcraft prepares to celebrate its tenth anniversary, **games™** decided it was the perfect time to look back at Blizzard's impressive back catalogue

NOWADAYS IT'S HARD to imagine PC gaming without thinking of Blizzard. It's responsible for three of the most important franchises on the platform – *World Of Warcraft*, *Diablo* and *Starcraft* – and has had phenomenal success with its *WoW* spinoff *Hearthstone*.

Once upon a time though, things were very different for the fledgling developer. Originally formed in 1991 by Frank Pearce, Allen Adham and Michael Morhaime, Blizzard was originally known as Silicon & Synapse and started off creating Amiga, PC and Mac ports for a range of games, including *Battle Chess* and *Castles*. That all changed with the release of *RPM Racing*, its first standalone game for the Super Nintendo. Other console releases quickly followed, including *Rock n' Roll Racing*, *The Lost Vikings* and *The Death And Return Of Superman*, but it was the release of the real-time strategy hit *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* that saw the Irvine-based developer turn its focus to the PC market. The move was a shrewd one, with Blizzard Entertainment now being one of the biggest players in the market thanks in no small part to its groundbreaking success with the likes of *Diablo III* and *World Of Warcraft*.

Join us as we celebrate this gaming giant and look at its key releases from the past 23 years. How many have you played?

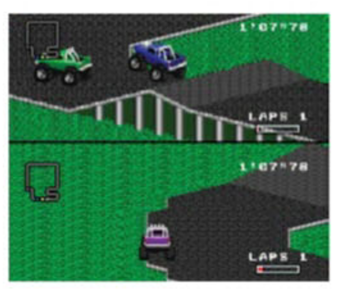


RPM RACING 1991

SYSTEM: SNES

Competent is the best way to describe Blizzard's first original entry in the world of videogames. It's essentially a remake of Electronic Arts' popular Commodore 64 game *Racing Destruction Set*, and allows you to race around your own courses, or compete in premade ones with a variety of different vehicles. While the racing itself is rather average, it's worth visiting as it's one of the first SNES games to utilise the console's distinctive High Resolution Graphics Mode. While the aesthetics give a good indication of the technical success that would mark many of Blizzard's later games, the uninspired gameplay and tiny playing window made *RPM Racing* needlessly difficult. Oh and that's an acronym for Radical Psycho Machine but you already knew that. Right?





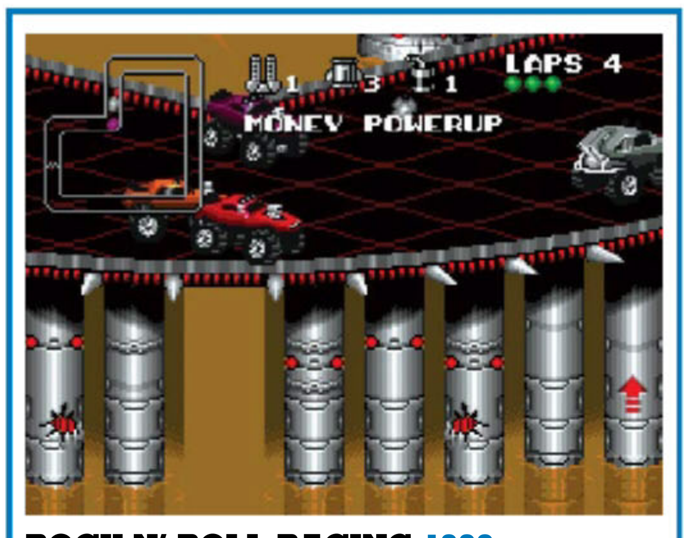
THE LOST VIKINGS 1992

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Now this is more like it. *The Lost Vikings* is clunky and a little awkward to control at times, but also a great example of the imagination and creativity that would form the hallmark of many later Blizzard games. A bizarre mishmash that incorporates puzzling, platforming and strategy, *The Lost Vikings* sees you managing your time between the titular Nords: Erik, Baleog and Olaf. Each has his own unique abilities – Erik runs faster and can jump, Baleog utilises close and long range weapons, while Olaf can use his shield to block enemies and projectiles. The Vikings themselves are full of character, while its success on the SNES saw it moving to numerous other platforms, from the Amiga CD32, to the Game Boy Advance.







ROCK N' ROLL RACING 1993

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Blizzard learnt quickly from the mistakes of *RPM Racing*, delivering a better sequel that is immense fun to play. Out came the high-res visuals, more weapons were introduced, the plinky-plonky soundtrack was replaced with a selection of heavy rock riffs, while the handling and track design was greatly improved. The end result is an entertaining racer that offers convincing physics, fierce competition and a great sense of progression. It's the superb renditions of rock tunes that many will (rightly) remember *Rock 'n Roll Racing* for.

BLACKTHORNE 1994

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Although *The Lost Vikings* hinted at Blizzard's interest in exploring game worlds, it was this effort that proved the developer was able to create interesting game worlds. *Blackthorne* is an epic, brooding adventure that calls to mind the likes of *Flashback* and *Prince Of Persia*. Protagonist Kyle is able in the platform stakes but packs a mean punch thanks to the meaty shotgun he carries. Gameplay is similar to the aforementioned Flashback, with shadows of the SNES port of *Alien 3*.







THE DEATH AND RETURN OF SUPERMAN 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES

Well this is an achievement. Against all odds, Blizzard made a Superman game that wasn't terrible. Based on the popular comic strip, *Death And Return* is worth playing because it allows you to control five different characters: Superman, The Cyborg, The Eradicator, Superboy and Steel.

They all feel fairly different to each other, but there's no denying that this is nothing more than a game about hitting things and hitting them hard. Now we're normally fine with this, but the combat of *Death And Return* is fairly run-of-the-mill and the lack of a multiplayer means that anyone other than a Superman fan will soon get bored. Still, being able to fly – albeit for limited periods – is a rather nice touch.





WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS 1994

SYSTEM: DOS, MAC

Warcraft certainly wasn't the first RTS game, but it was one of the first to really realise the possibilities of the still fledgling genre and help take it in new and exciting directions. The most notable difference to its peers is the distinctive fantasy setting. The sci-fi elements found in the likes of *Command & Conquer* and *Dune 2* are entirely missing, instead focusing on an age-old battle between humans and orcs. It features similar resource management to its peers; the ability to group together small parties and has a surprisingly slick interface for its age. There's no denying that it feels rather clunky to play now, but the ability to host matches between Mac and DOS players, compete in different scenarios and use spawn installations felt incredibly fresh at the time. This was a genuinely excellent strategy game and in fact was the title that's largely responsible for making Blizzard the success it is today.

JUSTICE LEAGUE TASK FORCE 1995

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES

There's a reason everyone forgot Blizzard's *Street Fighter II*-inspired one-on-one fighter. It's rubbish. Okay, rubbish might be a little harsh, but there's no denying this is a very forgettable brawler with few redeeming features. The sprites look decent but hitting your opponent rarely feels satisfying, while the difficulty is all over the shop. Kudos to Blizzard for making Aquaman as capable as every other hero here, but this is pretty dire stuff. In fact, we were right the first time. It's rubbish.





"WARCRAFT II BOASTS THE SAME BRILLIANT RESOURCE GATHERING AND CONTROLS THAT MADE THE ORIGINAL SO POPULAR TO PLAY"

WARCRAFT II: TIDES OF DARKNESS 1995

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Blizzard's sequel to its first strategy hit was another big success eventually shifting over 2 million units. That's a lot of Orc slaying. Like the original game, *Tides Of Darkness* consists of two separate single player campaigns, one for Orcs, the other for humans. It also boasts the same brilliant resource gathering and controls that made the original so popular to play. Simply replicating a past classic isn't enough for Blizzard though, so it introduced an insane amount of extras that further enhanced its fantastic original.

The landlocked gameplay of the original is expanded with the introduction of flying and seafaring craft; new races can be aligned with; it is possible to build a huge number of new structures, while the base resources of gold and lumber have been swollen with the introduction of oil. The Fog Of War mechanic has also been tweaked, making for a far better balanced game. In fact everything about *Tides Of Darkness* screams improvement, from its fantastic cartoony looking visuals to its slick and versatile interface. The console versions have new control systems and include the expansion *Beyond The Dark Portal*.



DIABLO 1996

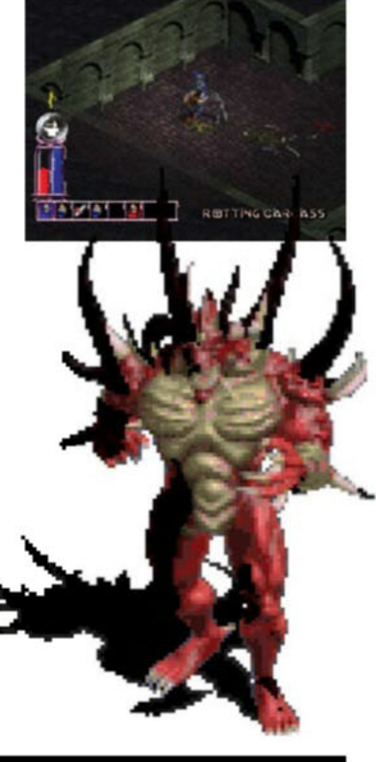
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Diablo is another example of a Blizzard game that takes a well worn genre and turns it into something far more exciting.

At its most basic *Diablo* owes fealty to the likes of *Dandy* and *Gauntlet*, early dungeon crawlers that allowed you to descend into the underworld and duff up a seemingly endless supply of monsters, but it feels far more epic. This in part is due to the three fleshed out characters: Warrior, Rogue and Sorcerer that all play differently to each other and in turn offer plenty of replay value once the game has been completed. It's the story that really sets it apart from other games of the time, that and the sheer amount of loot you can pick up as you play.

While *Diablo* has a fresh take on the war between heaven and hell, it also allows you to find a huge selection of insanely powerful items. While you'll fear exploring the deeper sections of Tristram (the village where *Diablo* is set) the sheer power to be found there will spur you on – often to your inevitable doom. It clearly plays best with four players, but *Diablo* still works extremely well when playing solo.









THE LOST VIKINGS 2 1997

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Blizzard's sequel is a rather unsatisfying one. It was released five years after the original game and straddles generations (the Saturn, PlayStation and PC versions were handled by Beam Software).
The structure of *The Lost Vikings 2* is the same as the first game: use your Viking's unique skills to traverse the puzzle-like levels. Unfortunately, the addition of two new characters, Fang the wolf and Scorch the dragon, make the game feel a little messier. While you still only ever control three Vikings at a time, the new abilities – Fang can climb walls and Scorch can fly and throw fireballs – don't gel as well together and it feels like Blizzard's game is trying to do too much. It works far better on the 32-bit systems, due to a lack of competition on those platforms at the time, but age has not been kind to it.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE BREVIK

Diablo's co-creator on how it came to be

What inspired *Diablo*?
There were many, many games that influenced *Diablo*'s design, but if I had to narrow it down to a handful, I would say that *Moria* – a Unix-based text game – and *Warcraft* were the biggest.

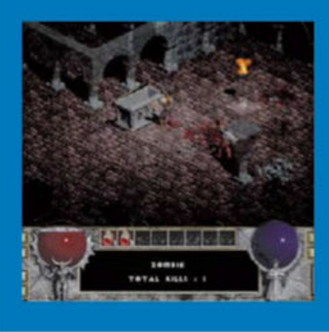
***Diablo* isn't like many traditional RPGs. Why is that?**
I was never a big fan of elves, unicorns and dragons. I thought that a zombie-infested game with demons was a far more attractive prospect than the Tolkien-esque stuff. We wanted a far grittier atmosphere to the game. I never really set out to make it strictly for a more mature audience, but we made it the way we found most interesting and different.

Why create an action RPG?
Because of the mechanics of *Diablo*'s real-time environment, we had to change how the numbers worked for this sort of game. It had to be balanced in such a way that it was action packed and involving. With pen and paper RPGs, fights can take a very long time, because each round can last ten to fifteen minutes in a normal-sized group. As a result, the numbers are different. You don't want there to be 25 rounds, but you might want that out of a *Diablo* boss monster.

Is it true you wanted to make *Diablo* as accessible as possible?
We joked that *Diablo* needed to pass the 'mom test', so we asked ourselves: is it simple enough that my mom could play it, or will she not understand it? If it was too complicated then we either changed it so that it wasn't, or introduced it over time in a step-by-step fashion so that complex concepts were broken down over time. We made the game extremely easy to use and accessible to a wide range of gamers. This was done to widen the audience and make it more of a mass-market kind of game.

Why did you create random dungeons?
I love random content, because you never know what's going to happen. With planned-out levels, you can balance the game easier and create certain situations you want the player to go through. But once the player goes through that content once, it's far less interesting to go through it again.

Why did you implement the multiplayer mode?
Blizzard's president proposed Battle.net. This was clearly a good idea and we agreed to it even though it meant extra work. We had to go back into the code to retro-fit much of multiplayer into it.









STARCRAFT 1998

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The beauty of Blizzard's hit RTS lies in the sheer diversity of its three races: the Protoss, Terrans and Zerg. Unlike many real-time strategy games of the time, each race has its own distinct abilities, making them stand apart from each other and lead to different styles of play. Despite these differences, the game itself is beautifully balanced, ensuring that no one faction has the upper hand. While the single player campaign mode is huge, consisting of 30 stages, it's the finely tuned multiplayer and level editor that helped Blizzard's game build a huge fanbase. The controls are great, with Blizzard taking everything it learned from *Warcraft* and creating a system that's fast and flexible.

DIABLO II 2000

SYSTEM: WINDOWS, MAC







Everything about Blizzard's sequel was bigger and better than the first. Graphically it was sensational, with dark gloomy locations that contrasted greatly with the limited environments of *Diablo*. The character roster has also been revisited with five new heroes: Amazon, Necromancer, Barbarian, Sorceress and Paladin. As with *Diablo*, each plays completely differently to each other, while their skill trees allow for an impressive amount of customisation.



WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS 2002

SYSTEM: WINDOWS, MAC

Another smash hit for Blizzard. The most obvious change is that there are two new races, Night Elves and Undead, with their own distinct skill sets. Creeps – hostile AI units that will attack anyone - are also a big addition to the game, adding an additional fear factor and making the mining of gold and other resources particularly dangerous. A day and night cycle has also been included, which changes the gameplay as creeps fall asleep at night, making scouting all the more effective. By far the biggest change is the introduction of heroes, powerful units that level up and unlock a range of useful skills and spells. Add in an expansive world editor and it becomes hard to see how Blizzard could possibly improve its classic in the future. In a similar vein, no new *Warcraft* games have been released since *The Frozen Throne* in 2003.



WORLD OF WARCRAFT 2004

SYSTEM: WINDOWS, MAC

We won't focus too much on Blizzard's game changer as it's covered in more depth on page 146, but let's just say it changed MMORPGs forever. One of the most noticeable aspects of *WoW* was that it wasn't massively original. Instead it simply took many of the elements from other similar games and added a level of polish that immediately made it stand out from its peers. Talent trees, quest systems, immersive lore and a near bug free launch all helped Blizzard's game on release, while its general easiness and accessibility ensured it picked up a huge number of new players who typically didn't play MMORPGs.

EXPANDING OUT

The many Blizzard expansions



BEYOND THE DARK PORTAL

FROM: WARCRAFT II
YEAR: 1996

The first expansion for a *Warcraft* game introduced two new campaigns, new multiplayer maps and 10 new heroes. Oh and it was developed by the defunct Cyberlore Studios.



HELLFIRE

FROM: DIABLO
YEAR: 1997

Interestingly, this expansion wasn't by Blizzard, with coding duties falling to Synergistic Software. It introduces a new character, the Monk, as well as two hidden ones (Barbarian and Bard).



BROOD WAR

FROM: STARCRAFT
YEAR: 1998

Starcraft's first expansion was a big one. It diminishes the success of rushing tactics, has a bigger focus on strategy and introduces seven new units and augmented AI when playing alone.



LORD OF DESTRUCTION

FROM: DIABLO II
YEAR: 2001

This is notable for the addition of its fifth act, two new classes: the Assassin and Druid and a raft of gameplay changes to the core game, including new items and weapons.



FROZEN THRONE

FROM: WARCRAFT III
YEAR: 2003

This expansion features four campaigns, new units for each available race and several neutral heroes. It also reintroduced some sea units last seen in *Warcraft II*.



BURNING CRUSADE

FROM: WOW
YEAR: 2007

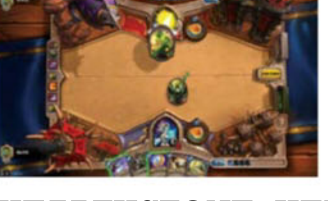
Blizzard's first *WoW* expansion sold over 2 million units on release day. It adds the Draenei and Blood Elves, upped the level cap to 70 and includes the Shaman and Paladin classes.




STARCRAFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY 2010

SYSTEM: WINDOWS, MAC

Excitement for Blizzard's sequel was so great that it sold over three million copies in its first month on sale. The excitement was well placed, as *Starcraft II* is arguably one of the best examples of the genre to date. Unlike the original game, the campaign of *Wings Of Liberty* focuses largely on the Terrans and is largely non-linear. It's also packed with variety, constantly challenging what you'd expect from a typical example of the genre and making it fresh and exciting. *Wings Of Liberty* delights in throwing curveballs at you, but also makes you think on your feet thanks to many of the returning units having new skills to master.




HEARTHSTONE: HEROES OF WARCRAFT 2014

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Blizzard's latest game has been a resounding success. Like *Magic: The Gathering* it's a collectible card game, but unlike its digital peer, *Hearthstone* is not trying to gouge you at every possible opportunity. Granted you'll have to start spending a bit of dosh if you want to compete in the big leagues, but it's possible to build up respectable decks without spending. Based on the *Warcraft* universe, *Hearthstone* features 10 characters, each with their own unique spells and abilities, from Warriors to Priests. The addition of these heroes works far better than the similar Planeswalkers of *Magic*, while their large number of unlockable cards ensures you'll be dipping in for more. As well as one-on-one duelling, *Hearthstone* also offers a drafting option called The Arena. You draft a deck of 30 cards by selecting from a choice of three each turn, then take on human opponents until you lose three times.



DIABLO III 2012

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Despite setting a new record on release for selling 3.5 million units on its first day of sale, things haven't been easy for *Diablo III*. It was beset by internet issues on release due to Blizzard's insistence on it being always online, while its Auction Houses proved so controversial they were eventually shut down earlier this year. Early issues aside, *Diablo III* is quite simply the best game about hitting monsters you're ever likely to play.

HEROES OF THE STORM 2014

SYSTEM: WINDOWS, MAC

Still in Beta, Blizzard's first MOBA already looks like it's going to solve one of the genre's biggest problems: accessibility. It eases you in, with easy-to-understand rules and great presentation. It's a free to play game, supported by micropayments, delivering a product full of Blizzard's usual deft touches.





WRATH OF THE LICH KING

FROM: WOW
YEAR: 2008

Ooh, your characters can now hit level 80. Other additions include the ability to explore the icy continent of Northrend and a new hero class in the form of the Death Knight.



CATACLYSM

FROM: WOW
YEAR: 2010

This was the big one as it helped usher in a complete overhaul of *WoW*'s playing systems, from major class changes to a complete overhaul of the talent system. The level cap here hit 85.



MISTS OF PANDARIA

FROM: WOW
YEAR: 2012

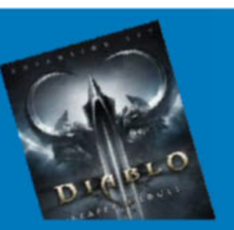
This expansion raises the level cap to 90, introduces a new continent, Pandaria. It also adds Pandaren (a group of anthropomorphic Pandas) and the Monk class.



HEART OF THE SWARM

FROM: STARCRAFT II
YEAR: 2013

The first expansion for *Starcraft II* focuses on the terrifying and ruthless Zerg faction. It follows directly on from *Wings Of Liberty* and features a number of new units for each of the races.



REAPER OF SOULS

FROM: DIABLO III
YEAR: 2014

There's a lot of new stuff on offer here. A new class, the Crusader is available, there's a fifth chapter, the level cap is now 70 and Adventure Mode lets you explore every region in the game.



GAME CHANGERS

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Released: November 2004 **Publisher:** Blizzard **Developer:** In-house **System:** PC

At its peak, *World Of Warcraft* enjoyed 12 million subscribers. Since then that number has dropped to a little under 8 million, but it often rises before big expansions

WoW didn't just popularise MMOs, it infiltrated pop culture, set the standard for the genre and raised Blizzard into the powerhouse it is today

IT'S INCREDIBLE TO imagine that, ten years later, a game could still be as relevant and as important as it was when it first launched. *World Of Warcraft* launched to a great deal of praise, and though fans would argue it's not nearly the beast it was back then – and, truth be told, monthly subscriptions *have* reached what we can expect to be their peak – it's still showing would-be competition what is needed in the genre. Blizzard's MMO was a success from the word go, capitalising on its rich world built with the *Warcraft* RTS games and twisting it into a third-person RPG. The result? A fully explorable world the scale of which the industry hadn't even seen, replete with an intricate set of storylines, in-depth RPG mechanics and a reliance on gear grinding that was at once both repetitive and highly compelling.

Indeed, the reason you're spending hours praying, hoping, wishing for a legendary item to drop in Destiny is all thanks to *WoW*, many years before it.

But that wasn't what made *World Of Warcraft* so enthralling for its players. Simple to understand mechanics had gamers hooked early on, but it was the social aspect – a one-two punch of faction-focused war and city-based hubs – that truly kept them coming back. It wasn't particularly original for an MMO to feature faction-based PvP, but there was something about *WoW*'s system that felt incredibly eloquent. Individual raiding parties would be organised by either Alliance or the Horde, which then set about hunting down lower-level enemies of the opposing faction – a fact that will make the words 'Stranglethorn Vale' send a shiver down any veteran player's spine. There was an ecosystem to all this, however; high level players would discover the assaults, and set out to give assistance. The attacking faction would request more reinforcements and so on, until a small case of ganking had dynamically – almost *naturally* – escalated into a sortie for justice, honour or whatever belief each group had held onto.

FOUR THINGS THAT DEFINED WOW | HOW WORLD OF WARCRAFT SET THE MMO BENCHMARK



THE CLASS SYSTEM

★ *WoW* might not have created the concept of the tank, healer and DPS roles, but it streamlined the process. Some classes were built for certain roles, others acted as hybrids that allowed players to switch on the fly. Either way, it showed other MMOs how to use the Holy Trinity of MMO roles.



THE WORLD (OF WARCRAFT)

★ While both factions had footings across Azeroth, the Horde was focused in Kalimdor while the Alliance took up large portions of the Eastern Kingdoms. Getting from one place to the other wasn't easy; cherished were the players who knew the routes and transported you to another continent.



THE FACTIONS

★ Belonging to a faction wasn't unheard of in MMOs, but something about *WoW*'s combination of decades-long feuds and the sense of place in its world made fighting for your faction feel important. It also meant an unexpected sense of trepidation when encountering an enemy player in the wild.



A FOOTMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

★ The lore of *Warcraft* had spanned three RTS games, so there was plenty for players to enjoy in the transition to MMO. Whether it was hearing an Alliance worker claim 'Job's done!', Northshire or the way game structures were designed on *Warcraft III* models, it encouraged nostalgia.

World Of Warcraft taught MMOs of its day that there needed to be a greater sense of purpose to your decisions, including the faction you play as. PvP is a given, but player-driven raids on opposing cities – even in spite of the high-level NPCs that guarded the streets – is not something that can emerge casually, there has to be a reason. It was enough that the races of the Alliance and their equivalent in the Horde had a history of hatred, a history that was told, shared and expanded throughout every inch of vanilla *WoW*'s questline. Though *World Of Warcraft*'s ultimate story touched on that of the undead plague – an obvious crossover with that franchise's previous outing, *Warcraft III* – quest lines would pointedly remark on the despicable nature of their eternal enemies. And even outside of player interactions, many of these quests sent you to overcome NPC forces in an area to ensure you remember who you hated the most.

■■■ It's hard to overlook the addiction that so many suffered with *WoW*. At its height players would spend complete days, totally drawn into the world. So vast it was that each new area felt like a revelation, a genuine new discovery to overturn and dominate. There were no loading screens – outside of the initial one, anyway – and so it was a seamless experience, a journey even. Long before the game implemented level 20 mounts and level 60 equivalents that could take to the air, exploration was restricted almost entirely to the slow plodding of putting one foot in front of the other. But with so much to see, so much to explore, it made *WoW*'s realm of Azeroth all the more rewarding to see unfold.

But best of all, it didn't require a behemoth of a PC to see it all. By making the smart decision to utilise a cartoon-like art style, Blizzard kept the system requirements down – making it all the more accessible to an even larger group of players. This ideology stems through all of Blizzard's modern output – most recently *Hearthstone*'s success in bringing the otherwise niche genre of collectible card game to the masses – but it was an element that was absolutely core to making *World Of Warcraft* the household name it is today. Though it might not seem it to look at it, *WoW* simplified combat and input to a point that it wasn't overbearing to any level of gamer. The pace at which new abilities were introduced meant that it was easy to follow – and in the early days the necessary visit to your nearest capital to learn a skill gave each new unlock a certain degree of significance. There was nothing that was difficult to follow, and since there was always a goal to aim for – a new level, a new dungeon, a new quest, a new *weapon* – it tapped into that inert need that all gamers have: to unlock *things*. Even now *World Of Warcraft* is simpler and easier to get into than ever, a factor that likely makes it one of the most popular MMOs still to this day.

THE REASON YOU PRAY FOR A LEGENDARY ITEM TO DROP IN DESTINY IS THANKS TO WORLD OF WARCRAFT

KEY FACTS

■ Despite being known for its huge, detailed world – the various lands of Azeroth actually encompass only 80 square miles of land. Still, exploring all that on foot took a very long while, which made the fact that mounts were so expensive a genuinely hard-earned reward.

■ *World Of Warcraft* launched with nine classes: Warrior, Rogue, Hunter, Priest, Paladin, Druid, Shaman, Mage and Warlock. What was interesting was – prior to *The Burning Crusade* – the Shaman class was restricted to the Horde faction and Paladins could only be created in the Alliance.

GAME CHANGERS

THE 10 BIGGEST MOMENTS IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT HISTORY

WITH A REAL-WORLD TIMELINE SPANNING 10 YEARS, WORLD OF WARCRAFT HAS HAD PLENTY OF STANDOUT MOMENTS



END OF DAYS

■ NOT MANY WITNESSED this moment, as it took place during the close of the beta servers ahead of *World Of Warcraft*'s launch in 2004. Rather than simply flipping a switch to shut them down, Blizzard spawned in hundreds of high-level infernal demons from *The Burning Crusade*. These warriors appeared in the game's cities and decimated everything, giving players a chance to fight for their survival (in vain, as the servers were still shut down).



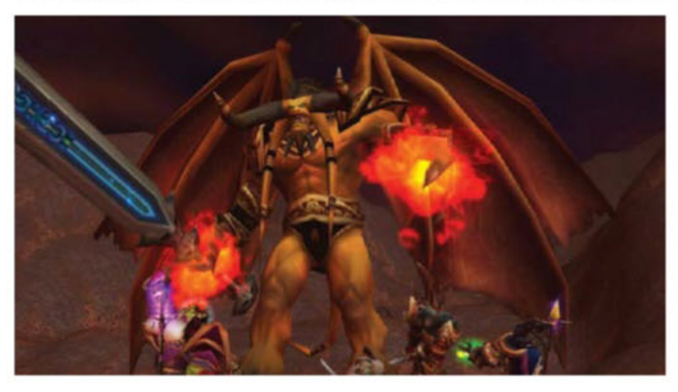
ZUL'GURUB'S CORRUPTED BLOOD

■ AS PART OF the final fight in the raid Zul'Gurub players encountered a disease named 'Corrupted Blood'. This disease shouldn't have left the raid instance, but some crafty players figured out that it would, so contracted the debuff and teleported into crowded cities. This disease spread, quickly killing lower-level players. An inadvertent bug, but a good example of the kind of emergent social gameplay early *WoW* was capable of.



LEEROY JENKINS

■ SO FAMOUS IS Leeroy Jenkins he has earned his own related in-game Achievements and featured as a card in *Hearthstone*. Jenkins made internet fame when a video of his guild preparing for a fight sprung to notoriety across the web, providing humour to all – even to those not au fait with *WoW*. The video featured po-faced preparation for a fight, culminating in a hasty Leeroy racing in – bellowing his name – and the devastation of the group.



LORD KAZZAK'S INVASION

■ AS A WORLD raid boss, Lord Kazzak shouldn't have travelled the great distance from the Dark Portal in the Blasted Lands to the green hills of Stormwind, but one savvy guild realised he could be kited around the world. Making the most of this they managed to drag him from the Blasted Lands, to Stormwind, where he would decimate any and all that would enter the area. Lord Kazzak was practically unkillable, even requiring Blizzard to reset the server.



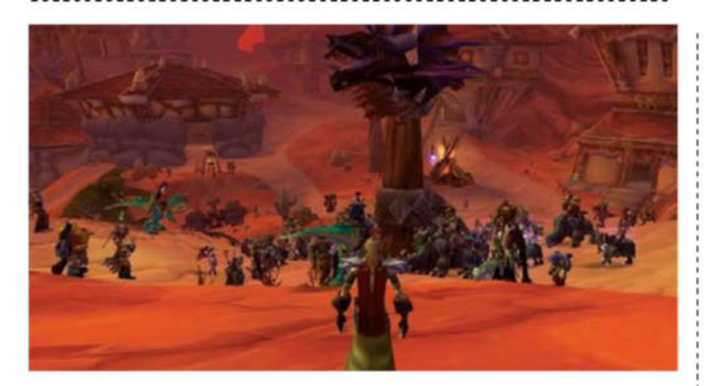
FUNERAL CRASHERS

■ IN MARCH 2006 a dedicated *World Of Warcraft* player by the name of Fayejin died of a stroke. Her guild – with whom she was active – decided they would host a funeral for the player. In a sadistic twist, however, rival guild Serenity Now decided to use this opportunity for a mass ambush, a single player acting as subterfuge by joining the candlelit vigil.



MAKE LOVE, NOT WARCRAFT

■ THERE'S AN ARGUMENT that if you've made it into *South Park* then you've truly entered into pop culture fame. In 2006 *South Park* aired its *World Of Warcraft* special, featuring scenes made from in-game assets. It was an instant success due to the self-mocking reverence it had for *WoW*, and opened a whole new level of popularity as thousands of new players poured in.



THE BROOD MOTHER

■ RAID INSTANCES WERE fewer in the early days of *WoW*, but many took a huge time investment – not only to access in the first place, but to complete once you were in. Onyxia was different, however. Requiring an unusual group of 40 players, Onyxia's raid instance didn't require a series of battles to complete – it was a short set of trash mobs and then onto the real deal. Battling the dragon brood mother was an epic fight that few managed.



FEIGN DEATH

■ IN 2007 A 12-year old boy managed to survive a real-world attack from an aggressive moose thanks to *World Of Warcraft*. Norwegian Hans Jørgen Olsen claims he yelled at a moose, causing it to attack; Olsen survived by dropping on the ground and playing dead, a skill he claims he learned from his hunter character in *WoW*. At level 30 hunter's could learn the ability to Feign Death that would lose any aggro they might have incurred.



SHELDON GETS HACKED

■ GAMERS DON'T OFTEN appreciate it when their hobby is referenced in *The Big Bang Theory* – what with many of the jokes being ham-fistedly forced in with no good measure – but when Sheldon's *World Of Warcraft* account is hacked it was presented with a sense of panic that many devoted *WoW* players will have encountered during their time on the game. Hacking was a prevalent problem during its most popular days.



A WHOLE NEW WORLD

■ A LARGE NUMBER of pop culture references have been included in WoW by Blizzard, so it's no surprise that Blizzard have included a new NPC in the latest expansion pack – *Warlords Of Draenor* – to honour the memory of Robin Williams. Williams was an avid player of the game, well-loved by the community for his devotion. Williams' famous roles are recreated, though the most popular is the genie, who recites quotes from Disney's *Aladdin*.



RETRO INTERVIEW

JANE JENSEN

Her Gabriel Knight adventure games stood out in the Nineties for their dark, layered stories and mature themes. Two decades later, Jane Jensen's Schattenjäger re-emerges from the shadows

Jane Jensen was an aspiring writer and adventure game fan when a short story she wrote caught the eye of a hiring manager at Sierra On-Line. She went on to become one of Sierra's renowned game designers, responsible for a trilogy of supernatural mystery adventures starring the roguish Gabriel Knight—a wannabe novelist turned Shadow Hunter—and his cynical assistant and sometimes love interest, Grace Nakamura. Though she kept making games after Sierra's 1999 shutdown, *Gabriel Knight* remains the prolific writer/designer's best-known work. With this month's release of the *Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers 20th Anniversary Edition* putting her beloved Schattenjäger back in the spotlight, we caught up with Jane to talk about her career highlights and where she hopes to take Gabriel and Grace from here.

You'd been at Sierra a few years when co-founder Roberta Williams suggested you pitch your own game—*Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers*. How was that development different to your work so far?

When I first started at Sierra, I was hired to be part of the writer's block. We were told, "You'll never be a designer, don't have that ambition, don't get yourself stressed about it because that's never going to happen." Just sit here and write dialogue and shut up, basically. [laughs] But that's not the way it worked out.

I had a huge sense of ambition and passion [on *Gabriel Knight 1*]. It was my chance and I really, really wanted to be a game designer. We had a passionate team and we were just really cranking on it. The game I did previously was *King's Quest VI*, which I co-designed with Roberta, and I was basically the one who was in the office every day, cranking out the "look" dialogue and stuff like that. So *Gabriel Knight* wasn't vastly different in terms of what I actually had to do, but because this was my own thing, and it was a darker, more mature story, and it was a more in-depth story, I cared about it a lot. I was very anxious to see it turn out well.

At what point did you know *Sins Of The Fathers* would be a hit?

We had taken the first day on floppy disk as a demo to E3. We got such a positive reaction to that, and by the time we shipped we got a magazine cover from Computer Gaming World, we'd sent out a preview build that had gotten really good buzz. So we kind of knew by the time it shipped that it was a successful title, and I pretty much rolled right on to *Gabriel Knight 2*.

> **I HAD HUGE AMBITION AND PASSION. GABRIEL KNIGHT WAS MY CHANCE AND I REALLY, REALLY WANTED TO BE A GAME DESIGNER**

How did the vibe at Sierra change throughout development of the *Gabriel Knight* series?

At the time that I started at Sierra, [the company] was really at its peak. After *GK1*, Sierra as a whole started waning a bit. A



DEVELOPER COMMENTS

JANE ON GABRIEL KNIGHT 2: THE BEAST WITHIN

“■■■ I WENT TO the studio and watched them filming some of [Sierra's first FMV game] *Phantasmagoria*, when I was just starting to write the *Gabriel Knight 2* design. I was much more conscious of the fact that these characters had to be something a real actor could play. The dialogue had to be really good because there were going to be live people standing there and saying my lines if it was bad I would feel terrible! So I was thinking of it more like a movie script, but we'd had really good voice over actors for *GK1* as well, so that game was already more acted out than novel-like. I had those [voices] in my head when I wrote the script for *GK2*.”

JANE ON MOEBIUS: EMPIRE RISING

“■■■ ON MOEBIUS, IT was nice working with a team [Phoenix Online] who were really into adventure games and who in general were very cooperative, trying to do anything that I wanted to do. I really like how cinematic it is, and the voiceover production was great, I love the actors. So all of that was really positive. The difficult part was the stress of managing the project. I've always been the designer and creative director, I've never really had to worry about budget and schedule and cracking the whip over the team, and we did have a very low amount of money. *GK1* was like a million dollars in 1993, and we ended up having like $390k for *Moebius*. It's a lot harder than you think it is, let's put it that way. I didn't foresee how much time it would take to do all the other roles and how much I would not enjoy that.”



"*Gray Matter*'s second development team was in Paris, and they had amazing artists," Jane recalls. "They'd send me concept art and it was just like, wow. Probably the best art I've ever had on a game."

lot of that was trying to figure out, "What is the next big thing? How do we get ahead of the curve?" With the FMV [of *Gabriel Knight 2*], and then the real-time 3D [of *Gabriel Knight 3*], the company itself was trying to figure out, "How do we stay on top of the heap?" And eventually it was clear that adventure games weren't going to accomplish that.

When did you realise that *Gabriel Knight 3* would be the last of the series?

It was a struggle throughout that project. We had a lot of turnover on the team. It was three years in development, at least, and it just didn't feel like the team was that excited. I think I had three different producers over the course of the project, people coming and going. There were individual people who were Sierra adventure game fans who were into it, but as a whole it felt like dragging a boulder up a hill.

And it was clear to me, the last year or so of working on it, that I was the only real Sierra designer left. I was kind of like the last dinosaur. The other teams were doing totally different things, shooters or whatever, and *GK3* was the last adventure game project. It was sort of a fizzle, because at the end it was just bug-pounding on various platforms and I stopped going into the office. I had signed off on the content and the producer was basically just trying to get the technology working correctly and the bugs fixed. It seemed to be months of waiting for it to ship. And then it did, and that was it. There was never a day that was like, "Goodbye Jane, here's your gold watch, thanks for being with Sierra On-Line." I just never went back, and they never called.

In *Moebius: Empire Rising*, paranoid genius Malachi Rector gets mixed up in a global conspiracy dating back to the Roman Empire.

Did you think there would ever be another *Gabriel Knight* game?

I thought it was over. After that I worked on a couple of novels, *Millennium Rising* and *Dante's Equation*, so after *GK3* shipped I figured that was the end of the adventure game part of my life and I'd be doing writing on other stuff.

How did you get back into the industry?

It was probably three years later, I got involved with a company doing casual games [Oberon Media]. This was pretty early on—there was Big Fish Games, and *Bejeweled* had just come out, but this was before hidden object games. So it was a brand new market, and it was clear from the statistics that it was a heavily female market. Strategically I was thinking if I could establish this company, then long-term we could do adventure games and this would be a good audience for it. Because one of the things that was clear to me about the industry was that big publishers were mainly making games for that 18-25 year old male market, and that wasn't an adventure game audience.

How did you know that?

The last E3 I went to, it was all Stormtroopers and girls in bikinis, and it was like, these guys don't care about *Gabriel Knight*. This is really a generalisation, but in general if you offer an 18-year-old guy a choice between *Tomb Raider*, or *King's Quest*, or *Gabriel Knight*, he's not going to be choosing the adventure game. And even on *Gabriel Knight* I had gotten a lot of feedback from people saying, "I played this with my girlfriend and she loved it." It seemed like I was getting letters like that constantly, telling me that it was particularly interesting to the female audience.

What games did you make at Oberon?

I did a couple of puzzle games and then the hidden object genre started. I was always trying to get in more story and more adventure gameplay, like inventory items and dialogue and things like that.

Did your hunch about the audience turn out to be true?

It's definitely true, if you look at hidden object games now, they have a lot of [adventure game] elements. Ours were some of the first games to do that, in that genre. The problem is it's a really tough market… it was mostly price issues, because Big Fish Games has the corner



Jane's casual game series *Dr. Lynch: Grave Secrets* evolved from an idea she had at Sierra: "It was an Agatha Christie-ish, cozy British mystery with this hyper-cynical, skeptic guy who was debunking this supposedly haunted archeology site."

on that market, they had dropped the price to $6.99 or even lower, there's a new one coming out every day, and we never had enough sales to increase the budget. So yes, I think that audience is very receptive to more story and more adventure gameplay, the difficulty is that the games in that market are so disposable.

Your first post-Sierra adventure game was 2010's *Gray Matter*. What was that development like?

It was the first time I'd done something completely different to *Gabriel Knight* in an adventure game and I was pleased with the design. We were working with a German publisher [dtp entertainment AG], because they were one of the only publishers who would even fund an adventure game at that point. I was happy to have somebody willing to fund and produce the project. It was a really difficult process—it started out with *Dreamcatcher*, and they cancelled it, and it was picked up by this little Czech team, and that producer got the dtp producer interested, and dtp moved it to one of their teams in Paris, and it just went through a lot of roadblocks like that. Ultimately, because of all that stuff, we didn't have a lot of money to finish the project, so that was stressful at the end. I was talking to those guys remotely and not super-involved with that production.

In 2012 you returned to adventure game development by starting your own indie studio Pinkerton Road. What prompted you to go to Kickstarter?

I was working for Zynga at the time, and on the side we [Jane and her husband, Robert Holmes] were doing the *Lola & Lucy* iPad app [a kids' ebook], and thinking eventually we'd like to have our own little company doing apps and smaller games. I was having some frustration at Zynga because the game I was working on was supposed to have a story, and they'd hired me specifically to do a story, but some of the people I was working with were like, "Why does it need a story? How do you tell a story? We can't have people talk"—it was really frustrating. The guys I was working with were having a hard time visualising a story of any kind. I just felt like, "You know what, I'm tired of explaining why there should be a story. I just want to do an adventure game."

When Tim Schafer did his Kickstarter and it was so successful, that sort of changed things, because originally we'd thought, "We'll do this little company, we'll get *Lola & Lucy* out, maybe that'll give us enough money that I can quit my job"— thinking about this as a longer-term process of building this little company. And then we realised that if we did a Kickstarter we might be able to fund a real adventure game and do it all a lot faster. So we took the plunge. At the time it felt like if we didn't do it quickly then the window would close, because there were probably going to be a lot of other adventure game projects coming to Kickstarter, and it seemed that the interest would die off pretty quickly.

THERE'S A LOVE STORY, AND THERE'S THESE MURDERS, AND THERE'S VOODOO… ALL OF THOSE THEMES ARE TIMELESS

How do you feel about that in hindsight?

I would change how we went about it. When we first went up [on Kickstarter], we offered people a choice of games, and we didn't have a demo or anything. We got a lot of feedback on the campaign that it wasn't specific enough, and we ended up promising all kinds of crazy stuff. If I were to do it again I would do it much differently. At the end of the day, it helped us get *Moebius* out and it helped us start our studio, so I can't say that I regret doing it necessarily. But it was way, way, way more difficult and stressful—not only during the campaign, but also during the product development—than I ever anticipated.

Though largely faithful to the original, the *Sins Of The Fathers* 20th anniversary remake includes a few new locations and puzzles.



Sins Of The Fathers has more than 7,000 lines of dialogue. "Even when I'm writing straight fiction, I always take a pass and read it out loud. I think dialogue's always better if it's speakable and realistic," Jane says.

During the Kickstarter, you and Activision (the owner of Sierra's old properties) reached an agreement for *Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers 20th Anniversary Edition*. How did that happen?

Activision contacted me. I don't know if that would have happened if I hadn't been out there on Kickstarter and very visible. Basically, the Telltale games and the growing casual market, the growing female audience, Double Fine's Kickstarter—I think all of that made certain people at Activision interested in possibly doing something with adventure games again.

Why a remake? Would you have preferred to do a new *Gabriel Knight* game?

Initially my interest was in doing *GK4*, but I think Activision made a good argument that *GK1* was always the pilot episode. It explained who Gabriel is and how he got to be that way, so remaking that for a new era was a great idea, and hopefully would enable us to kick off a new round of the franchise and more new stories.

What do you like about the *Sins Of The Fathers* remake, compared to the original?

I love the graphics. It feels so much higher resolution—very New Orleans and very atmospheric, I think it looks really beautiful. It has a nice mood to it.

Are there things about it that make you think, "That's so Nineties"?

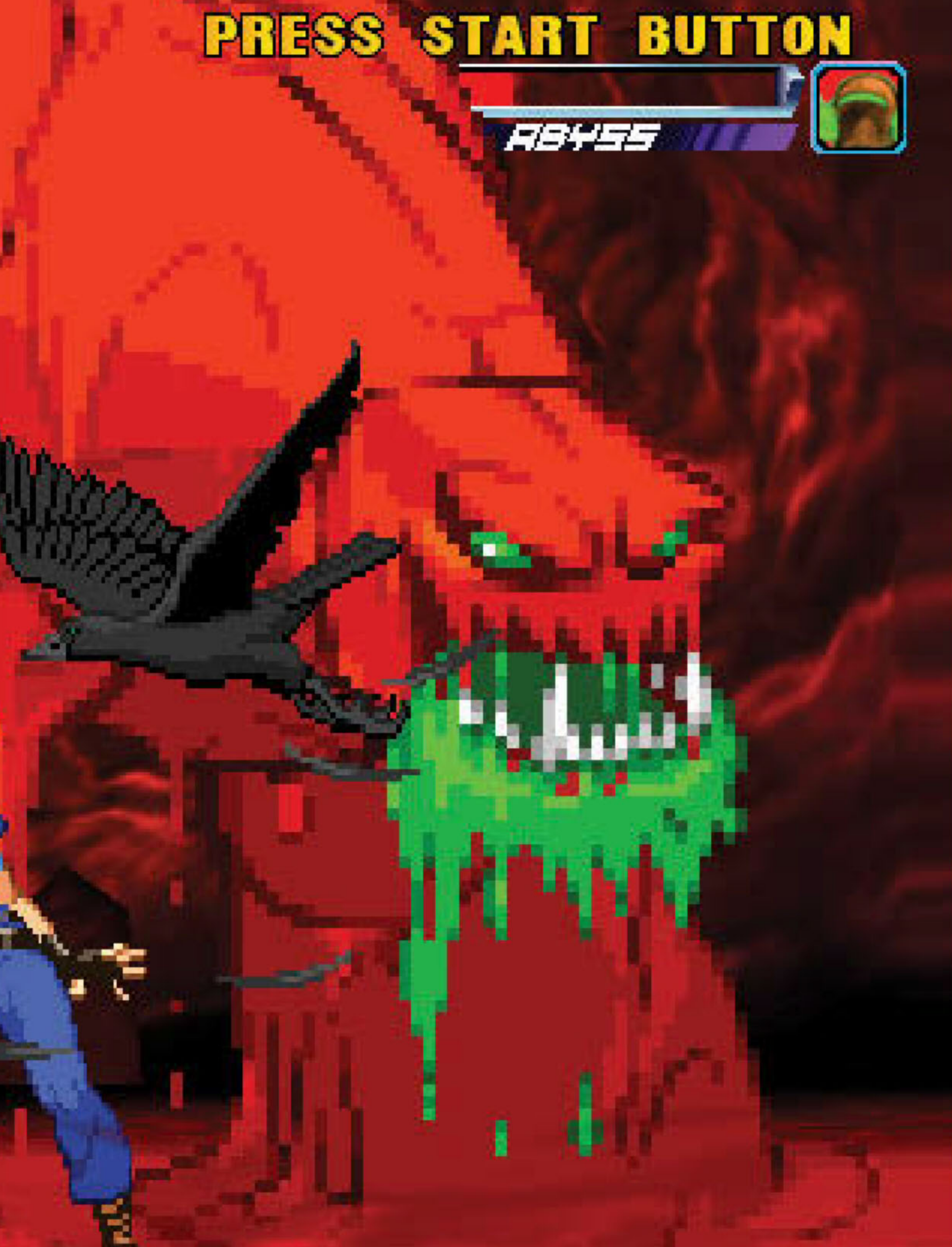
Really just the setting. [The characters have] huge CRT monitors. In *Moebius*, the character's smartphone was a major part of the UI, and we obviously can't have any of that in *Gabriel Knight*. I'm definitely aware of the period that we're writing in, but the story itself really holds up well. I don't think it feels dated, particularly. There's a love story, and there's these murders, and there's voodoo, and there's this whole family thing, and I think all those themes are timeless.



BESTBOSS

MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 2: NEW AGE OF HEROES DREAMCAST 2000

■ Fighting game bosses are infamously difficult to get right, and *Marvel Vs. Capcom 2*'s Abyss trod the line between well thought-out monstrosity and cheap, shape-shifting irritant. Hellbent on sending the Earth back into a primordial stew, Abyss was more than just a boss, he forced you to learn how to execute all of *Marvel Vs. Capcom*'s different mechanics. His first form required you to master hopping and jumping to avoid his armour suit's slow, sweeping attacks, while his second form (a green humanoid thing) requires ranged attacks to counteract his paralyzing projectiles. The third and final demon Abyss (pictured) relies on brute strength and spamming energy beam attacks – twitch guarding and taking advantage of recovery frame-rates is the only way to dominate here. Abyss can be a horrible experience, but if you know how to pick him apart, he can be taken down hard.

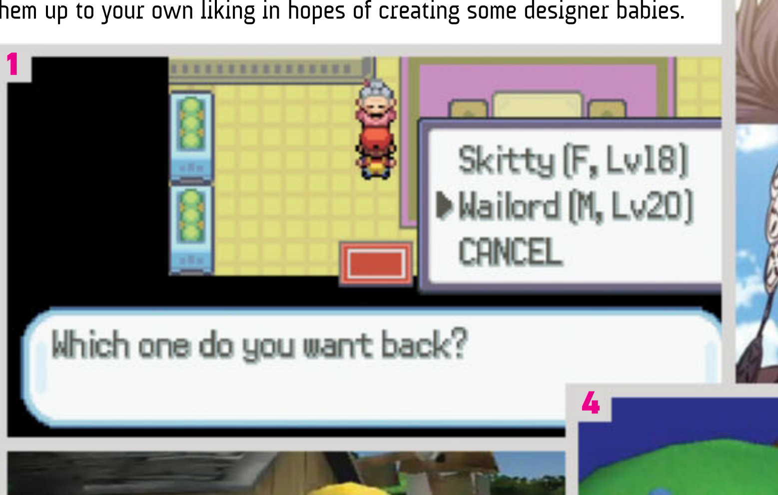

PRESS START BUTTON
ABYSS

ESSENTIALS

10 BREEDING SIMS

When we put together this list, we had to sit down as a group and think about exactly how we'd title this top ten. We settled with 'breeding sims' because the alternatives made it all sound a bit… off-putting. The games we're examining here are the best examples of how you can collect certain animals, monsters or even people, and match them up to your own liking in hopes of creating some designer babies.







Pokémon series
Developer: Game Freak

1 A whole subsection of the *Pokémon* series that at first presents itself as a simple way of getting the elusive 'baby' Pokémon is actually an incredibly complex system that is used and abused by competitive players to eugenically craft the most powerful Pokémon possible. Breeding can yield Pokémon with boosted 'individual values' – hidden stats that can determine growth rates alongside a semi-random 'nature' selection. Devout breeders will discard Charmanders like yesterday's jam if they aren't born with a good IV rating and a Timid nature, for example. We'd like to say we love all our Pokémon equally, but we wanna be the very best…

Monster Rancher series
Developer: Tecmo

2 The PSOne's *Monster Rancher* saw you take on the role of a monster breeder, whose ultimate goal was to breed the most powerful monsters that would carry you to victory in a tournament – the result being basically an institutionalised blood sport mixed with indentured labour. We remember sifting through our CD collections to feed into our PSOne, each disc providing a unique monster with different stats that could then be bred with each other to create stronger, more useful monsters. Thinking about it, that was probably the only time something ever good has come out of mixing a bit of Sting with our old *The Police* CDs…

Fire Emblem series
Developer: Intelligent Systems

3 *Fire Emblem* has slowly been evolving from a tactical RPG to a hybrid genre of role-playing game and date simulator: by standing units next to each other in combat, you can build 'support levels' between your characters, the ultimate goal being to get them to a point where romance is possible. If Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* taught us anything, it's that this kind of forced relationship can only lead to death (or the feigning of it, at least) and this trope is continued in Fire Emblem: breeding a high-strength character with a Pegasus Knight, say, can result in an almost unbeatable character.

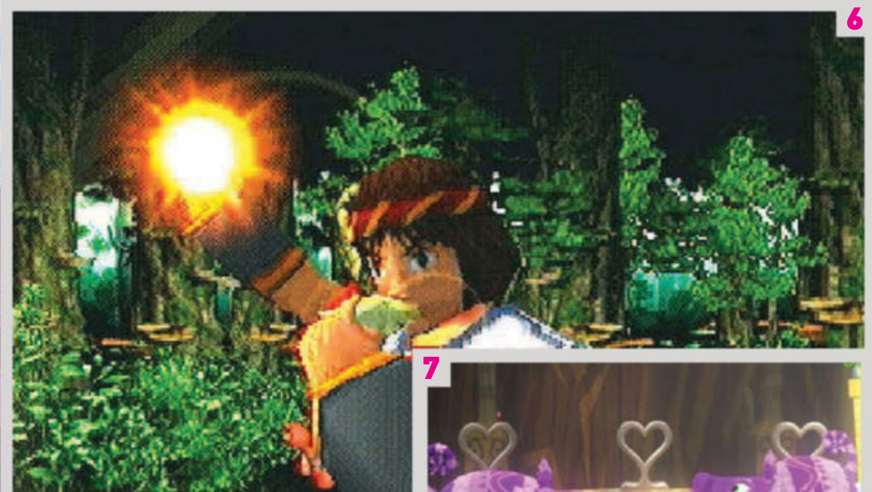
Sonic Adventure 2
Developer: Sonic Team USA

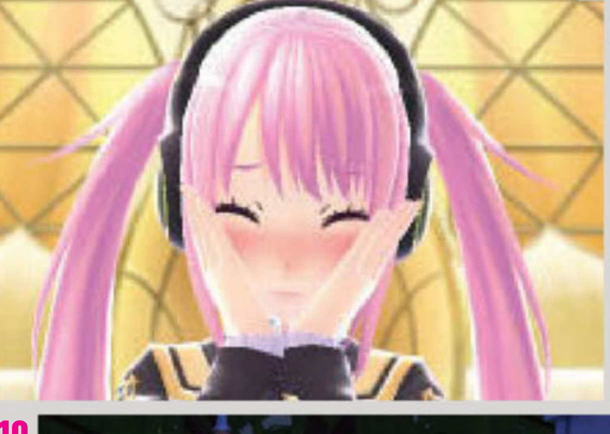
4 *Sonic Adventure 2* was the first Sonic game to introduce the idea of a playable evil side (unless you count Knuckles from *Sonic and Knuckles*…) Because of this, the developers also included the ability to breed good/evil Chao – in what was essentially a *Digimon*-inspired *Tamagotchi*-like mini-game, you could breed, evolve and reincarnate Chao that could participate in battles, races and other games scattered over a few Sonic Adventure releases. The ultimate goal was to get a Chao's stats to S-rank – no mean feat when it meant feeding, exercising, fighting and playing with your Chao, killing it, rebirthing it and doing it all again.

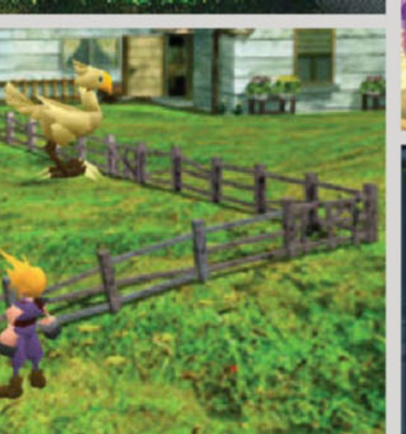
Final Fantasy VII
Developer: Squaresoft

5 Other *Final Fantasy* games have Chocobo breeding mechanics (and *Final Fantasy X-2* and *XIII-2* even have their own monster creation side quests) but the most famous, and purest, has to be the *Final Fantasy VII* Chocobo breeding. Getting a golden Chocobo would typically take around an extra eight hours on top of your regular *Final Fantasy VII* playthrough, and would require breeding higher level birds (holding special 'nuts') to – possibly – find yourself with a wonderful bird to take you to remote islands. Taking it to the Golden Saucer amusement park and racing it would then give you this warm glow of pride… and the Counter Attack Materia…













Jade Cocoon: Story of the Tamamayu
Developer: Genki

6 Often referred to as the mature version of the *Pokémon* games, Jade Cocoon was an ambitious project considering the hardware it was running on (PSOne). Players would have to venture into the forest where, using a special magical flute, they'd capture wandering demons that could then be fused by your cursed (and dying) wife. Fusing demons would merge both their stats and their physical appearances – you could get an iron-ridged dog beast, fuse it with an albino bat and come out with this metal-winged avian god *thing*. More games need to implement physical breeding effects – nothing's done it as well as *Jade Cocoon* since.

Viva Piñata
Developer: Rare

7 *Viva Piñata* featured 60 obtainable animals you could recruit to your garden. Some were simple to obtain – sauntering up to your garden because it contained lovely sweets – whilst others had to feast on pre-existing species to reproduce and evolve. This led to the game featuring a complex 'doughnut of life' – an intricate food chain you'd need to master if you wanted to be the richest sweet baron in the land. You also had the opportunity to 'romance' Piñatas – an activity that would take you into a not-very-thinly-veiled sexual metaphor of a mini-game, then miraculously spring forth a baby of your selected species.

Spore
Developer: Maxis

8 It isn't surprising to see the developer behind *The Sims* release a game that's all about genetic manipulation. From the very first time you boot the game up, the focus is on creation: your start by shaping a critter's DNA, eating certain other proteins in a vat of primordial soup. The life you absorb will dictate how you evolve; crawling out of the sea with a huge jaw, or protective shelling or rudimentary camouflage is dependent on our play style and tactics. This goes during your on-land stage, too; when you lay eggs, certain abilities and traits can be passed onto your offspring: it's as comprehensive as you'd expect from Maxis.

Conception
Developer: Spike

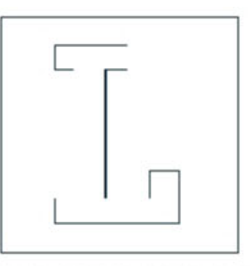
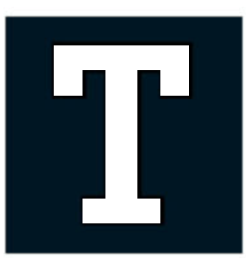
9 Known in Japan as '*Conception: Please Give Birth To My Child*', the main conceit to *Conception* lies in the male protagonist's drive to 'charm' as many students as possible for him to produce 'Star Children' with them – pseudo-human beings that can be taken into dungeons to battle 'impurities'. Depending on the girl you choose to, erm, charm, your 'Star Children' will have different abilities. Your potential mates all have ties to the Zodiac, and their personalities dictate the abilities your minions will have. That does mean there's a set of twins to represent Gemini… we wonder what inspired that creative choice…

The Sims series
Developer: Maxis

10 The original life-simulator/ *Truman Show* fantasy, *The Sims* is the dollhouse of the new millennium. You can create entire societies and enact your life upon theirs behind the white picket fences of middle suburbia. While there's a lot of chaos involved in how *The Sims* works, you also have a lot of control over how your subjects – err, we mean 'characters' – mate and raise their families. Because most of the personality in a Sim is player-directed, there aren't too many mechanics related to legacy per se, but if you choose to pass a Sim's narcissistic tendencies onto her son, then well… there's nothing they can really do about it, is there?

THE





TURTLE BEACH ELITE 800

MANUFACTURER: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£249.99**

WHEN IT COMES to personal audio, it doesn't come much more comprehensive and powerful than this new headset from Turtle Beach, compatible with the PS4 and PS3. The promise of 360-degree 7.1 Surround Sound is something that many headsets try to make, but one that few can really stand up to after scrutiny. The Elite 800 not only manages to deliver on that technology for a fairly reasonable price compared to the competition, but does it while packing in a whole bunch of other favourable features and great comfort.

For instance, the wireless technology for the Elite 800s is excellent, keeping you clear of the wires between your headset and DualShock that can ruin an otherwise pleasant gaming session. The traditional hidden mic of Turtle Beach headsets makes an appearance of course, meaning that you could actually use these headphones out and about without looking like a complete fool.

Which leads us into the question of sound quality, which is ultimately the greatest concern. Turtle Beach has taken a multi-plane approach to delivering the sound, which means it simulates audio from a higher, lower and at-ear level to create the most accurate surround sound possible. It also delivers plenty of bass, which is something many headsets can fall down on. Overall, the latest piece of tech from Turtle Beach is a little pricier than some, but brings a lot of quality with it too.



LINK NENDOROID FIGURE

As Link figures go they don't really come any cuter or more perfectly proportioned than this little beauty from Good Smile Company and its Nendoroid series. It comes with changeable expressions and plenty of articulation.
www.geekvault.co.uk



GAMER SOAPS

The reputation of gamers as being smelly basement-dwellers needs to be combated with greater levels of hygiene from us all. Now available in PS4 DualShock and Xbox One controller varieties, these soaps should help us along.
www.firebox.com



AMIGURUMI GAME BOY CROCHET

These rather lovely looking cuddly Game Boys by Becky Garratt on Folksy fit rather snugly in the hand. For the retro gamer who has everything, this is likely to be a rare surprise. Plus, it looks quite a lot like a BMO prototype with that cute little face.
www.folksy.com

GAMING CLOTHING



CHOMPING BALL

Perhaps the greatest meeting between the worlds of Mario and Miley Cyrus known to humankind. This mash-up of pop culture and gaming may be out of date fast, but could be worth it.
www.threadless.com/product/5881/Chomping_Ball



BONUS STAGE

Taking inspiration from the car-smashing stages from *Street Fighter II*, this excellent design by Verso on Threadless is a pretty great meeting of style, humour and retro cool.
www.threadless.com/product/5857/Bonus_Stage



A PIXEL OF MY CHILDHOOD

More retro love over on Threadless, this time chronicling the amazing array and colours of classic Nintendo consoles over the years. Also available in sweatshirt form for winter gaming warriors.
www.threadless.com

KEEP CONTROL

DISTRIBUTOR: **HANDZ** PRICE: **£13.30**

WE LOVE A good motivational poster to get us going as we walk out of the door each morning, and there's no better place to find such things than the amazing community of graphic artists and sellers on Etsy. Take, for example, this striking NES controller poster commanding you to take control of your day. Seize the moment like you would seize this gamepad before leaping into battle in *Mega Man 2*. What could the world throw at you that would beat this inspirational message? Well, perhaps the punishing torment of trying to complete *Mega Man 2*. That would certainly put a wrinkle in your day. But other than that we think this piece of art is the perfect thing to get you in the right frame of mind before your venture out into the wilderness and take on the challenges of the day. And you can find plenty more posters like this one on Handz's seller page on Etsy if you want to build a collection.
http://etsy.me/1t2hwmT





ATTACK ON ALL FRONTS

DISTRIBUTOR: **CONSIDERGRAPHICS** PRICE: **£10.13**

AVAILABLE IN MULTIPLE sizes from a selection of equally striking graphic designs, we have to say the sight of Chun-Li, Ryu and Blanka leaping into battle with abandon lifts our spirits in ways that we cannot entirely comprehend. Perhaps it's a call to button-mash your way through the day? If you just keep hitting the buttons that make things happen, maybe you'll come out the winner in the end? Then again, Ken is missing from this poster, so it could be a call to use more precise and considered attacks. To learn the methods and madness of the world in order to perfectly dragon punch your troubles in the face and send them flying into next week. Either way, living your life by the rules of *Street Fighter* seems like a good move if only because no trouble ever comes from walking the streets in sleeveless Gi that we know of. In all honesty, we haven't tested that theory first hand.
http://etsy.me/ZCC9tE

RAPTURE TRAVEL POSTER

DISTRIBUTOR: **WILLIAMHENRYDESIGN** PRICE: **£12.67**

YOU CAN FIND a bunch of cool gaming posters from WilliamHenryDesign on Etsy, but this is one of our favourites. Taking its cue from the founder of Rapture Andrew Ryan, the application of this phrase to your life should be empowering. You are your own master and controller of your own destiny. There is nothing that can stand in your way if you do not allow it to do so. Except of course that you don't live in Rapture, so actually there may be quite a lot standing in your way. Perhaps we should simply think of it as being purely inspirational and not apply it to any particular way of living or political movement, otherwise we're likely to come a cropper. All that said, we love the simple use of typography, the dark green and white colouring and the subtle wear and tear effects towards the bottom of the piece. All fine additions to an excellent wall mounting. So, would you kindly give this poster a closer look?
http://etsy.me/10dCQep



TOYS | PERIPHERALS | APPAREL | GADGETS | BOOKS



THE ART OF ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY

(LIMITED EDITION HARDCOVER)



PUBLISHER: **TITAN BOOKS**

HAVING GONE BACK to the drawing board both figuratively and literally, the latest in the *Assassin's Creed* series has seen some pretty amazing development work put into it in all departments. Until such time as books detailing the amazing achievement of engine coders become popular, this artbook will have to suffice as a document of what the Ubisoft Montreal (and other studios) team put together in the concept stages of *Unity*.

Since its earliest days the art of *Assassin's Creed* has been an interesting extension of some of the expressions of the game. Early concept art for Altair, for instance, saw him placed in profile and face-on compared to an eagle, presumably to match the style of his hood to the bird of prey. With *Unity*, the art still carries a lot of abstract motifs and expressive flourishes that contrast heavily with the realism the final game attempts to attain. It also dovetails heavily with some of the revolutionary art of the time, depicting patriotic mobs leading the charge against oppression.

That all said, a new setting and the richness of revolutionary Paris has given the Ubisoft art team plenty to play with, as does having another new hero to design and give costumes to. Arno's customisation options mean he's been through a number of iterations to reach the cover art star we recognise now and many of those stages of development are likely to appear in the final game as costume options for differentiating yourself in co-op play. As with all of Titan's art books, the final product is glossy and packed with interesting content. Another excellent coffee table read.

VERDICT 8/10



THE EVIL WITHIN

We love a good graphic novel tie-in to a videogame, and the bizarre setting and challenges of *The Evil Within* does seem like a smart place to attempt such a thing. Follow student Dana Robinson as she gets caught in her greatest fears. Expect gruesome art and a pulpy tale.
https://forbiddenplanet.com



THE ART OF PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES

One of the more imaginatively designed and crafted games in recent years has been *Plants Vs. Zombies*, and while it may not be the most nuanced of artistic endeavours, the chance to see some never-revealed concepts for the game series is still appealing.
https://forbiddenplanet.com



MINECRAFT BLOCK-O-PEDIA

Promising details and uses for every single block in the world of *Minecraft*, this collection could only come from the game creator itself, Mojang. This collection of block facts should prove essential even for experienced and hardened builders and miners.
https://forbiddenplanet.com



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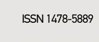
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